NATION

New CEC, ECs law gets SC nod

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BUSINESS

IT stocks rally lifts markets to new lifetime high

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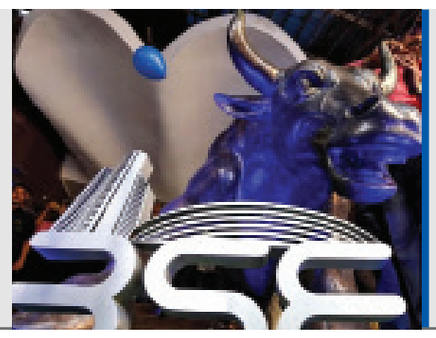

SPORTS

Australian Open: Sumit Nagal outclasses Molcan

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Parl's Budget session begins from 31 Jan

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

A brief Budget session of Parliament, the last of the 17th Lok Sabha, will be held between 31 January and 9 February, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi said on Friday.He said on X, The new government, which will be sworn in after the Lok Sabha polls expected in April-May, will present the full-fledged budget later. Since the term of the 17th Lok Sabha ends on 16 June, it is set to be the last session of Parliament before general elections are announced.In 2019, the Lok Sabha polls were announced on 10 March and voting was held in seven phases between 11 April and 19 May. *—PTI*

Drugs worth ₹68.41 crore seized in Mizoram, 3 arrested

AIZAWL, 12 JAN

Drugs worth Rs 68.41 crore were seized and three persons arrested in two separate operations in Mizoram, the Assam Rifles said on Friday.Acting on a tip-off, Assam Rifles personnel raided Bualpui village in Siaha's district, and seized 225 gram of heroin, it said. The heroin, estimated to be worth Rs 1.75 crore, was seized on Wednesday, it said, adding that two people were arrested in connection with it.In another operation on Thursday, the forces seized 20 packets of methamphetamine tablets, weighing 22.2 kg, from the Zokhawthar-Melbuk Road in Champhai district.The drugs, worth Rs 66.66 crore, were handed over to Excise and Narcotics Department. *—PTI*

SC refuses to stay new law on CEC, ECs appointment

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Supreme Court on Friday refused to stay the new law that provides for appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners by a panel excluding the Chief Justice of India. A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta, however, agreed to examine a batch of petitions challenging the new law and issued notice to the Centre. The bench asked senior advocate Vikas Singh, appearing for Congress leader Jaya Thakur, who sought a stay on the new law, to serve a copy of the petition to the Centre's counsel. The bench told Singh, "No, without hearing the other side, we can't. We will issue a notice." *—PTI*

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Houthis vow retaliation after US, UK strikes

DUBAI, 12 JAN

The leader of Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels threatened retaliation after US and UK-led airstrikes on them in response to their attacks on Red Sea shipping. This pulled the world's focus Friday back on the years-long war raging there, even as tensions rise across a Middle East already torn by Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.
The strikes killed at least five people and wounded six, the Houthis said. As the bombing lit the predawn sky over multiple sites held by the Iranian-backed rebels, Saudi Arabia quickly sought to distance itself from the attacks as it seeks to maintain a delicate detente with Iran and a ceasefire in the Yemen war from which it hopes to finally withdraw. *—AP*

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India gets its longest sea bridge in Mumbai

PM inaugurated the project while sounding LS poll bugle

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the inauguration of 'Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri-Nhava Sheva Atal Setu' in Navi Mumbai, *PHOTO: PTI*

MUMBAI, 12 JAN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday inaugurated Atal Setu, the longest sea bridge in the country connecting Mumbai and its satellite township Navi Mumbai. He sounded the bugle for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, saying the fulfilment of this project was his guarantee.

Modi, who was on a day-long visit to Maharashtra, inaugurated the Rs 17,840 crore Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri-Nhava Sheva Atal Setu, the l ongest bridge as well as the longest sea bridge in the country connecting south Mumbai with Nhava-Sheva in Navi Mumbai.

The six-lane trans-harbour bridge is 21.8 km long with a 16.5 km long sea-link.

> **People were fed up with how mega projects were stalled and they had given up hope wondering if big projects will ever be completed. But it was Modi's guarantee that the country will change**
>
> Narendra Modi, Prime Minister

The foundation stone of the bridge had been laid by prime minister Modi in December 2016.

"When I came here on 24 December, 2016 to lay the foundation stone of this sea bridge, which faced a lot of roadblocks, I had resolved that the country would undergo a change. Completion of the sea bridge despite the Covid-19 pandemic is crucial and important," Modi said.

Before 2014, mega scams used to be the topic of discussion. But 10 years down the line, mega projects getting completed is the talk, he said.

"I thank the government of Japan and remember late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Both of us had vowed to complete the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link project," the PM said. From the venue, Modi also inaugurated new suburban railway station Digha Gaon on Thane-Vashi/ Panvel trans-harbour line and 6th line between Khar Road and Goregaon railway stations in Mumbai. *—PTI*

PM STARTS 11-DAY RITUAL FOR RAM TEMPLE OPENING

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday began a special 11-day religious exercise 'Yam Niyam' preceding the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya on 22 January, as he spoke about experiencing feelings like never before in his life.

Modi said it is a sacred occasion for all Indians and Lord Ram's devotees and that everyone is waiting for the historic moment on 22 January when the idol of Ram will be consecrated at what is believed by followers as his birthplace.

He said it is his good fortune that he will be a witness to this auspicious occasion. Modi said God has chosen him as an instrument to represent all Indians during the 'Pran Pratishtha' exercise and that he is undertaking the 11-day special religious exercise keeping this in mind. It is difficult to articulate one's sentiments at this time but he is making an attempt, he said. Modi said scriptures lay down strict and arduous guidelines for people to follow for the 'Pran Pratishtha'. *—PTI*

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ENGINEERING
MARVEL
Atal Setu or the Mumbai Trans Harbour Sealink (MTHL) is India's longest sea bridge. The bridge was proposed in 1962 but was sanctioned in 2018
TRAVEL TIME CUT
It will reduce travel time between south Mumbai and Navi Mumbai from 90-120 mins to just 15-20 mins
Length over the sea: 16.5km
Connects: Sewri (South Mumbai) to Nhava-Sheva (Navi Mumbai)
Total length: 21.8km, 6lanes
Cost: ₹17,843Cr
Average vehicles expected daily: 70,000
Permitted speed: 100 kmph
Toll price: ₹250 one way | ₹375 Round trip
Built with: 1,77,903 metric tonnes of steel & 5,04,253 metric tonnes of cementv

ED raids TMC Min's home in civic body scam

KOLKATA, 12 JAN

Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Friday conducted raids at the residences of West Bengal Fire and Emergency Services Minister Sujit Bose, TMC MLA Tapas Roy and former North Dumdum Municipality Chairman Subodh Chakraborty in connection with its probe into the irregularities in recruitments in civic bodies.

Accompanied by central forces, ED officers conducted raids at two residences of Bose in the Lake Town area in North 24 Parganas district early Friday morning, he said.

The central agency officers also raided Tapas Roy's BB Ganguly Street residence and Chakraborty's residence in Birati, he said. "We are conducting search operations at the residences of three TMC leaders in connection with the recruitments in civic bodies. We are also talking to the leaders," the officer told PTI. Police personnel from local police stations reached the respective places and cordoned off the entire area.

The raids are being conducted amid tight security in West Bengal *PHOTO: PTI*

The ED officers initially faced resistance in entering Bose residence and after around 40 minutes they were allowed inside, the source said.

The central forces were seen equipped with extra protection gear like helmets, automatic guns, which an ED officer said, was done keeping in mind the assault on them last week during the raid at Sandeshkhali.

On 5 January, three Enforcement Department (ED) officers were assaulted and their vehicles damaged allegedly by supporters of TMC leader Shahjahan Sheikh when they tried to raid his residence at Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district in connection with their probe into the ration distribution scam. The TMC denounced the coordinated searches at the homes of several party leaders. *—PTI*

2 arrested in attack on ED team in Bengal

Kolkata, 12 Jan

Two people were arrested on Friday in connection with the attack on an Enforcement Directorate (ED) team during a raid at the house of TMC leader Shajahan Seikh in Sande shkhali last week, police said. Those arrested were identified as Mehaboob Mollah and Sukomal Sardar, they said. . The duo were produced before a court, which sent them to police custody for three days. *—PTI*

OVER HIT AND RUN LAW

Truckers withdraw 17 January strike

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

Truck drivers in State will not go forward with the strike called on 17 January after Central government said the stringent laws for hit-and-run cases under the new Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita (BNS) have not yet been implemented.

The Centre said the provisions regarding hit-and-run cases under section 106(2) of Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita, 2023 will be implemented after due consultation with All India Motor Transport Congress (AITMC), said GR Shanmugappa, the chairman of AITMC.

He said, "Drivers shouldn't be in a panic state. There are mischief-mongers and vested interests trying to circulate unfounded rumours, misleading fellow drivers. There's no need to pay attention to those people. If, in case, the Central government tries to implement it (the rumoured new provisions), AIMTC will engage in all possible ways to prevent implementation." *—Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

- He said, "Drivers shouldn't be in a panic state. There are mischief-mongers and vested interests trying to circulate unfounded rumours."

STATE LAUNCHES YUVA NIDHI SCHEME

SHIVAMOGGA, 12 JAN

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar rolled out Congress party's fifth poll guarantee, Yuva Nidhi scheme, here on Friday. Shivakumar said the scheme was not meant to fill the pockets of youth but to empower them economically and socially.

"Yuva Nidhi scheme aims to empower youth, providing them with the necessary self-confidence to transform their lives," Shivakumar said. Quoting the proverb, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime," he outlined the goal of Yuva Nidhi scheme to empower the youth. The scheme aims to encourage young individuals to create employment opportunities rather than just seek jobs. *—Salar News*

>>>More on Page 2

Terrorists open fire at Army vehicles

JAMMU, 12 JAN

Suspected terrorists fired upon a convoy of vehicles carrying security personnel in Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir on Friday evening, prompting security forces to launch a search operation, officials said.

No security personnel was injured in the attack, they said.

"At around 1800h today, a Security Forces convoy of vehicles was fired upon by suspected terrorists from a jungle near Krishna Ghati, Poonch sector. No casualties to own troops. Joint search operations by Indian Army and JKP (Jammu and Kashmir Police) are in progress," the White Night Corps of the Army posted on X.

The vehicles that came under attack were carrying security personnel back to the camp, the officials said.

The incident came after a high-level security meeting chaired by Northern Army Commander Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi to chart out an anti-terror operation plan for the new year to foil design of terrorists in the region. A similar ambush on Army vehicles took place in Poonch on 21 December. *—PTI*

TO DETER PIRATES

India deploys more warships in Arabian Sea

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Navy has now deployed almost 10 frontline warships with marine commandos in the region stretching from the north and central Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Aden to deter piracy and drone strikes, the officials said on Friday.

"Sestroyers, frigates and offshore patrol vessels are deployed in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden with a special focus near the coast of Somalia to prevent piracy and drone attacks on merchant vessels," the navy officials said.

According to the officials, the warships are keeping an eye on the situation to deter any incidents at sea.

Indian Navy continues to monitor the maritime security situation in North/ Central Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden *PHOTO: PTI*

Amid the recent spate of attacks on Indian merchant ships in the Arabian Sea, the Chief of Naval Staff Admiral R Hari Kumar on Wednesday said that Navy was proactively deploying its fleet to keep pirates at bay.

Addressing media persons after unveiling the first indigenously manufactured Drishti 10 Starliner Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) in Hyderabad on Wednesday, the Navy chief said, "Over the past 42 days, as many as 35 such attacks (approximately) have taken place, primarily targeting Israeli-owned vessels. However, no India-flagged vessel has been attacked so far."

"We are now, very proactively, deploying our units there to ensure that the pirates at kept at bay. If you look at the last 40-42 days, about 35 such attacks have taken place, largely on Israeli-owned shipping assets.

No India-flagged vessel has been attacked so far," the chief of the Naval Staff said.

The Navy chief added that there have only been two incidents, so far, which prompted the marine warriors to conduct anti-piracy operations.

"Both incidents involved non-Indian-flagged vessels. In the second incident, an Indian crew was aboard the vessel, prompting the Navy to respond," he added. *—ANI*

EAM likely to travel to Iran on Monday

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

S Jaishankar *PHOTO: PTI*

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar is set to travel to Iran on Monday to hold talks with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian during which they are expected to deliberate on a range of bilateral and regional issues including the unfolding security situation in the Red Sea, one of the world's most crucial waterways.

Jaishankar's planned visit to Tehran comes against the backdrop of growing global concerns over Houthi militants targeting merchant vessels in the Red Sea amid the Israel-Hamas conflict.

The US and the UK have already launched air strikes targeting the Houthi positions in Yemen.

The external affairs minister is scheduled to travel to Iran on Monday for a short visit, people familiar with the matter said, adding the two sides are likely to deliberate on a range of bilateral and regional issues including the situation in the Red Sea. India has been closely monitoring the unfolding situation in the Red Sea. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Minor rescued after rape by bus cleaner

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

A private bus cleaner has been arrested for allegedly raping a minor girl after keeping her under his custody for one week in Yelahanka. Dabaspet police raided the house of Anand, 24, who committed the crime just one month after he was released in a separate Pocso case and rescued the girl. The girl used to travel by the bus in which Anand was working as a cleaner, said RS Siddappa, Police Sub-Inspector, told Salar News. He took the girl to his rented house in Yelahanka and raped her. The girl's parents lodged a complaint on 30 December that she was missing for a week. Police arrested Anand on 4 January and the incident came to light on Friday. Anand had been arrested in 2021 for a violation of Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (Pocso) Act and served three years in jail. Released in 2023, he has now been arrested again after a month.

—Salar News

3 held in Mudigere for suspected moral policing

CHIKKAMAGALURU, 12 JAN

Mudigere police in Chikkamagaluru district have arrested three individuals, including two minors, in a case of moral policing in connection with another youth's interaction with girls in the locality. Based on the complaint filed by Mohammad Munaz,18, he was assaulted by a group at mudigere bus stand on 9 January which was caught on CCTV. In response to the incident, one of the suspects, Anil Poojari,27, filed a counter complaint with the police. Poojari alleged that Munaz used to approach college girls. According to Poojari, he and the two minors warned Munaz against such behaviour. In retaliation, Munaz, accompanied by two associates, allegedly attacked Poojari and the other two youths at the bus stand on the evening of 9 January. Contrary to Poojari's version, CCTV visuals from the bus stand revealed that Munaz was assaulted and beaten up.

—Salar News

PHOTO: X

Cong MLA admits to sale of jobs at KOMUL

KOLAR, 12 JAN

Malur Congress MLA KY Nanje Gowda, who is also the President of Kolar-Chikkaballapur Milk Producers Cooperative Union Limited (KOMUL), has admitted to having sold vacancies during the recruitment at KOMUL for a sum ranging between Rs 20 lakh and Rs 30 lakh. The recruitment committee members headed by Gowda have also admitted that some politicians recommended names of some candidates who have been accommodated in the recent recruitment. Enforcement Directorate, which conducted raids on houses and offices of Gowda and other officials, has said the members of the recruitment committee have flouted rules and regulations while making appointments. The raids on 14 locations connected to Gowda and his associates have unearthed incriminating documents about the recruitment. The sleuths have been able to seize Rs 25 lakh in cash and also documents of moveable and immovable properties valued at over Rs 50 crore. Gowda had denied the allegations and said the recruitment has been done transparently.

—Salar News

Interfaith couple attack case now takes political colour

NCW asks police to invoke IPC provisions against attackers

HAVERI/BENGALURU, 12 JAN

The attack on an interfaith couple in Haveri district has taken a new twist with the woman alleging gang rape and also a political colour with Opposition BJP slamming the Siddaramaiah government as a "sleeping sarkar".

National Commission for Women (NCW) asked Karnataka Police Chief to lodge an FIR invoking the relevant provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) against the men who allegedly assaulted the couple.

Seven men who allegedly barged into a hotel room and attacked the couple at Hangal in Haveri district were charged with gang rape after the 26-year-old victim complained that she was sexually assaulted by them, police said. Three of them, who also belong to a minority community, have been arrested in connection with the 8 January incident, they said.

"On Thursday afternoon, the victim's statement was recorded in front of a magistrate wherein she alleged she was raped by seven men who also abused and assaulted her. So, based on her claim, we have added section 376 D of IPC (gang rape) to the existing FIR," a senior police officer said. "Another suspect is hospitalised due to an accident he met a day after the alleged incident. So, once he is discharged, he will be taken into custody. Our teams are trying to trace the remaining suspects in the case," he said.

The entire assault inside the hotel room was filmed by the gang, which later went viral on social media platforms **PHOTO: X**

Home Minister G Parameshwara said: "It is not the question of moral policing. A lady goes with another person to a lodge. So many people have seen her going along with somebody and they have questioned and now after two days, she comes out and says she was gang-raped." Parameshwara asserted that the law and order situation in Karnataka is under control and charged BJP with trying to politicise the issue.

- Former chief minister and senior BJP leader Basavaraj Bommai alleged double standard as far as moral policing is concerned by the State government and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah

BJP launches #SleepingSarkara campaign

BJP's State unit hit out at the Congress government over the incident, alleging that a surge in crimes against women in the State reflects rampant lawlessness and that criminals operate boldly without fear of police intervention. BJP launched a social media campaign with the hashtag "SleepingSarkara.

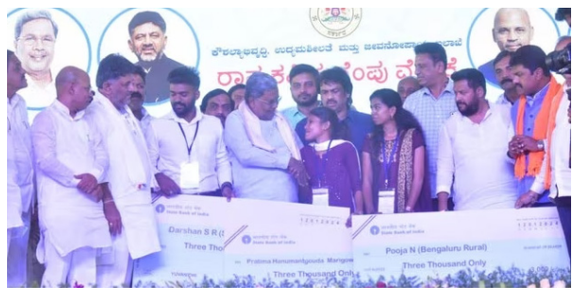
Former chief minister and senior BJP leader Basavaraj Bommai alleged there was a double standard as far as moral policing is concerned by the State government and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. "Earlier, there was moral policing carried out in coastal areas. The Chief Minister then raised a big voice against it and they said they would take immediate action and they have taken also. But in this case, the Chief Minister has not spoken a word. That's a message to the police department not to act on the merit of the case or as per the law."

In a letter to the Karnataka DGP, the NCW has said the incident is appalling and the commission has taken a serious note of the matter. "All the accused men must be arrested at the earliest. The victim should be provided with free of cost medical treatment," the women's body said. NCW Chairperson Rekha Sharma said in New Delhi that if a response is not received within three days, the body would send a team to the southern State.

—Salar News/PTI

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

State launches Yuva Nidhi scheme



The scheme, the final pre-poll promise of the government was rolled out by the Chief Minister **PHOTO: X/@INCKARNATAKA**

SHIVAMOGGA, 12 JAN

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar rolled out Congress party's fifth poll guarantee, Yuva Nidhi scheme, here on Friday. Shivakumar said the scheme was not meant to fill the pockets of youth but to empower them economically and socially.

"Yuva Nidhi scheme aims to empower youth, providing them with the necessary self-confidence to transform their lives," Shivakumar said. Quoting the proverb, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime," he outlined the goal of Yuva Nidhi scheme to empower the youth. The scheme aims to encourage young individuals to create employment opportunities rather than just seek jobs.

Siddaramaiah distributed cheques to six beneficiaries to symbolically kick-start the Yuva Nidhi scheme. The State government has earmarked Rs 250 crore for the scheme in the current financial year. It expects that next year, it will cost Rs 1,200 crore to the State exchequer and from 2026 onwards, Rs 1,500 crore annually. The Congress government has fulfilled all the promises made during Assembly elections 2023, the KPCC President said. The Congress government has already launched four guarantees.

The Yuva Nidhi scheme targets graduates and diploma holders from the academic year 2022-23 who have been unemployed for over 180 days after completing their education. Degree holders will receive Rs 3,000 per month, while diploma holders will get Rs 1,500 per month. The financial aid, provided for a maximum of two years, ceases once the beneficiary secures employment. Students pursuing higher education are not eligible for the scheme.

Shivakumar highlighted the importance of the youth thinking globally and working hard, drawing inspiration from the teachings of philosopher Swami Vivekananda. Quoting spiritual leader Sai Baba, he said 'Blood and money must always be in circulation.' Likewise, youth must work hard. "Today is Swami Vivekananda Jayanthi. Youth must lead a life of self-respect. There is nothing that youth can't achieve if they are determined. Former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi started youth empowerment initiatives in the country. Youth must make use of the opportunities and strengthen the country."Shivakumar encouraged the youth by quoting Kuvempu, that criticism fades away, but one's work remains. He urged them not to be concerned about criticism, but instead, to focus on their goals and work diligently.

Shivakumar said AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge and other leaders will participate in a party workers' rally in Mangaluru on 21 January. He encouraged all party workers to attend the event.

—Salar News

Boy in coma for 7 years dies, FIR filed

BENGALURU 12 JAN

A 13-year-old boy, who was in coma for seven years due to an alleged overdose of anesthesia during surgery died.on 3 January. On Friday the boy's parents registered a First Information Report (FIR) with Banashankari police, demanding action against the doctor involved in the case.

The incident took place in 2017 when the victim, Vignesh, was admitted to a private hospital in Subramanyanagar for hernia treatment.

The parents claimed that their son had been given anesthesia three times during the surgery and raised concerns about the medical procedures. Banashankari police inspector said,

Vignesh **PHOTO: IANS**

"The victim's parents alleged that the hospital management has provided them with Rs 5 lakh as compensation and the parents have spent Rs 19 lakh on medical expenses to save their son's life.

The parents accused the hospital management and the doctor of threatening them when questioned about the medical procedures and their child's death.

—Salar News

HIGH COMMAND DECISION

HM warns mins of losing jobs if Cong sees defeat in LS polls

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

Home Minister Dr G Parameshwara on Friday said the ministers who fail to ensure Congress' win in Lok Sabha seats in the State will lose their posts.

Parameshwara said the warning has come from the high command and the ministers have to deliver otherwise "they will be sacked".

Parameshwara said, "State In-charge Randeep Singh Surjewala is arriving in Karnataka in a day or two. The discussion about the candidates and ministers contesting Parliamentary elections has not come up yet. We have been asked to take responsibility and carry out the campaigning."

G Parameshwara **PHOTO: FB**

"The high command also said that if the party gets defeated in seats where it can win easily, it will be assumed that the work was not done. The high command has asked workers to take warnings seriously or they will face consequences," he said.

"AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge called the party leaders for Lok Sabha election preparations. Leaders from all states were invited. There are five clusters in the country and Karnataka is in the cluster one. Earlier, observers were appointed and now coordinators are put in place. The war room is being renamed as the convention centre. Senior leader Sasikanth Senthil has been made the head of coordination," he said.

—Salar News

2 arrested in college admission scam

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

Two people were arrested in a college admission scam by the City police. The police seized n auto rickshaw and two mobile phones. They also recovered 7 lakhs.Two other accused are currently on the run.

Reportedly, the accused made a false promise to the victim saying that he would get his daughter's admission done in a prestigious university.

The accused high-jacked the victim's car and demanded his wife to pay Rs 7 lakh and after receiving it, he left them deserted at Dr Puneet Rajkumar road.

—Salar News

Tobacco market at Hassan sees record price

HASSAN, 12 JAN

The ongoing auction at the Ramanathapura tobacco market in Hassan district has created history as the average price of low-grade tobacco has reached unprecedented levels, bringing relief to growers who have long grappled with price losses. In contrast to the previous year's average prices of Rs 236/kg for good and medium-grade tobacco and Rs 212/kg for lower grades, this year has seen an upswing with Rs 254/kg for the best grade, Rs 251/kg for the medium grade, and Rs 236/kg for the lower grade.

Platform 7 in Sector C of the Ramanathapura tobacco market has witnessed the sale of 6.21 million kg of tobacco, raking in Rs 152.58 crore. The average rate per kg for the transaction stands at Rs 265. At Platform 63, traders purchased 5.62 million kg, fetching Rs 138.39 crore for the farmers involved. The average rate for this section of the auction was Rs 246 per kg.

Tobacco **PHOTO: SALAR**

The bidding process has seen prices fluctuating between a minimum of Rs 200 and a maximum of Rs 266 per kg of tobacco, resulting in a total transaction of Rs 291 crore by 10 January. Around 78 companies have participated in the auction.

Farmers who used to sell one kg of hoodi for Rs 10 to Rs 12 are now receiving Rs 100 to Rs 166 in the market.

—Salar News

Cong to perform poojas in Ram temples on 22 Jan

SHIVAMOGGA, 12 JAN

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Friday said he will visit Ayodhya after 22 January whenever he gets time to pay his obeisance to Lord Ram, but added that Congress leaders and workers would offer special pujas in Ram temples across the State on that day.

"I have not received an invitation for the inauguration of Ram temple (on January 22). We are not running behind them (BJP) to pay obeisance to Sri Rama. We too worship Rama but they (BJP) are politicising the Rama temple issue. We oppose their politics and not Sri Ramachandra," he told reporters.

Siddaramaiah **PHOTO: PTI**

Siddaramaiah, who arrived here to launch the Congress government's fifth guarantee 'Yuva Nidhi', said his party leaders and workers will perform special prayers in Ram temples across the State on 22 January.

"I will see. After 22 January , whenever I get some time I will visit Ayodhya to pray to Sri Rama. We are not against Rama. We only oppose BJP's politics," Siddaramaiah said.

—PTI

City shop raided over illegal sale of LPG cylinders

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

City police have raided a Shop-cum-house for unauthorised selling of LPG domestic cylinders. The police raided the houses of Manjunath enterprises in Annaiah Reddy Layout of the City. Cops seized 290 cylinders, 10 refilling rods, 300 company seal labels, and three goods centre vehicles.

—Salar News

Sextortion racket busted, one arrested

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

City police have arrested a man who was involved in a sextortion racket. Reportedly, the victim had complained three months ago when an unknown person contacted the victim. Police said that the accused pretended to be a girl, and acquired the victim's pictures and morphed them and threatened to make it viral, demanding Rs 1,10,000

—Salar News

2 foreigners, 5 from City held after drug bust

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

City police have arrested 2 foreign nationals and five drug peddlers in the City and have recovered items worth Rs 1.66 crore. The anti-drug operations were carried out in Girinagar, Madiwala, Chikkajala, RT Nagar and Baiyya ppanahalli over one week. In another case, Central Crime Branch arrested a foreigner who has been living in the City since 2018 in a drug case. The police have seized Rs 12 lakh from him.

—Salar News

Farmers to take out rally in Delhi on 13 Feb

MYSURU, 12 JAN

Farmers from across the country will converge in Delhi on 13 February to conduct a rally under the aegis of Samyukta Kisan Morcha to raise a host of demands including complete waiver of agricultural loans, said Kurubur Shantakumar, the convener of South India Samyukta Kisan Morcha

Samyukta Kisan Morcha organised 14 Kisan Maha Panchayats in various states to raise awareness among farmers, said Shantakumar, who is also the State president of Union of State Farmers' Organisations. Other key demands of the farmers include the withdrawal of Central government from World Trade Agreement to safeguard the interests of Indian farmers, an increase in Fair and Remunerative Price of sugarcane to a minimum of Rs 4,000, a pension scheme with a minimum of Rs 10,000 for farmers above 60 years and a revamp of the crop insurance system to cover all crops.Shantakumar also voiced concerns about the alleged violations in Bannari sugar factory in Varuna, the Chief Minister's constituency. He urged the government to initiate an investigation and take corrective actions to ensure justice for the farmers. Additionally, he called for the elimination of political interference in the cooperative system, APMC, cooperative banks, and milk producers' organizations.

—Salar News

HUSSLE IN AIRPORT

Passenger traffic at B'luru airport rises by 35%

BENGALURU, 12 JAN

Bengaluru international airport had a footfall of 37.2 million passengers in 2023, marking a 35.3 per cent increase compared to the previous calendar year, airport authorities said on Friday.

The airport, known as Kempegowda International Airport, said that 32.7 million of these passengers were domestic and 4.5 million were travellers to international destinations. On 29 April, 2023, the airport recorded the highest number of passengers in a single day--1,16,688.

In 2023, factors such as reduced travel limitations, improved economic conditions, and increased demand for leisure and business travel led to a notable rise in growth numbers, a statement issued by the airport said.

On 29 April, 2023, the airport recorded the highest number of passengers in a single day--1,16,688 **PHOTO: PTI**

It said that 17 March, last year had 748 air traffic movements (ATMs), defined as the landing or take-off of an aircraft, the highest for a single day in the year.

"It is a notable recovery, considering that the highest ATMs on any single day in calendar year 2022 was 693. Domestic ATMs last year saw a substantial 22 per cent recovery, while international ATMs showed a 15 per cent increase.

- In 2023, factors such as reduced travel limitations, and increased demand for leisure and business travel led to a notable rise in growth numbers, a statement issued by the airport said

"These indicators reflect the positive momentum in the aviation sector, demonstrating the gradual return to pre-pandemic level travel patterns", it said.

In September 2023, the airport transitioned international operations from T1 to T2 terminal.

November witnessed the launch of Lufthansa's weekly thrice, non-stop Bengaluru-Munich flights. October marked the introduction of Maldivian Airlines, catering to Male with thrice-a-week operations.

Additionally, five new domestic routes were introduced, contributing to the overall capacity growth. AIX (created by the merger of Air India Express and Air Asia India) commenced domestic operations from Bengaluru in October last year.

—PTI

Senthil Balaji's plea dismissed for the third time

CHENNAI, 12 JAN

For the third time in row, a sessions court here on Friday dismissed the bail petition filed by Tamil Nadu Minister V Senthil Balaji, arrested by the ED last year in money laundering case. Principal Sessions Judge S Alli dismissed the bail petition of the DMK leader on the ground that there was no change of circumstances in the case.Balaji was arrested on 14 June, 2023 by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with a money laundering case linked to a cash-for-jobs scam when he was the Transport Minister during an earlier AIADMK regime.Soon after his arrest, he underwent a bypass surgery at a private hospital in the city. Later, the ED took him into custody for interrogation and following that he was remanded in judicial custody. In August, the central agency had filed a 3000-page chargesheet against Balaji. *—PTI*

AAP Rajya Sabha candidates elected unopposed

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

AAP's Rajya Sabha nominees in Delhi Swati Maliwal, Sanjay Singh and ND Gupta are set to be elected unopposed as no candidate from any other party has filed nomination, officials said on Friday.The six-year term of AAP MPs Singh, N D Gupta and Sushil Kumar Gupta ends on 27 January.While the AAP has renominated Singh and ND Gupta for a second term, it nominated Maliwal, former Delhi Commission for Women chief, to replace Sushil Gupta."The three candidates are set to be elected unopposed since no other candidate has filed nomination. The results will be announced formally later in the day," an official said.The last date for filing nominations was 9 January while the scrutiny of nominations took place on January 10. The last date for the withdrawal of candidature is 12 January. *—PTI*

Karti Chidambaram appears before ED third time

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Taking a dig at BJP after its defeat in the Karanpur assembly election, Rajasthan Congress chief Govind Singh Dotasra on Wednesday said this is a "lesson" for the saffron party. In a setback to the newly formed BJP government, Minister of State Surendra Pal Singh on January 8 lost the election in Sriganganagar district's Karanpur by a margin of 11,283 votes to his Congress rival Rupinder Singh Kooner. Dotasra said the people of Karanpur have done the work of rejecting the BJP government and this is a lesson for them. "They should work on the issues of the people and according to the sentiments of the people," he added. Dotasra said that it has been more than a month but the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has not done any work in the state. "The government has only changed the names of our schemes, weakened our schemes and those who were given employment by our Congress were removed," he added. *—PTI*

SC grants relief to Pramanik in attempt to murder case

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Supreme Court on Friday ordered the West Bengal police to not take any coercive action against Union Minister of State for Home Nisith Pramanik in a 2018 attempt to murder case.A bench of Justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal listed his plea challenging the the 4 January order of the Jalpaiguri Circuit Bench of the Calcutta High Court which refused to grant him anticipatory bail in the case. An attempt to murder case was registered against Pramanik with Dinhata police station of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in 2018, when a group of people had opened fire on Trinamool Congress workers.A man was allegedly shot at and injured in the firing.*—PTI*

EAM & Blinken talk on Red Sea

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar *PHOTO: ANI*

NEW YORK, 12 JAN

The United States has welcomed the "increased cooperation" with India in defending freedom of navigation in the Red Sea as the two countries discussed "shared concerns" over the reckless Houthi attacks in the region.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke Thursday and "discussed the United States and India's shared concerns over the reckless Houthi attacks in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which threaten the free flow of commerce, endanger innocent mariners, and violate international law".

State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement that Blinken emphasised the Red Sea is a major commercial corridor that facilitates international trade and "welcomed increased cooperation with India in defending freedom of navigation in the region".

Jaishankar and Blinken also discussed the Israel-Hamas conflict, efforts to prevent the escalation and increase the delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza. Blinken also discussed Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the statement said.

In a post on X, Jaishankar said he had a "good discussion" with "my friend" Blinken.

"Our conversation focused on maritime security challenges, especially the Red Sea region. Appreciated his insights on ongoing situation in West Asia, including Gaza," Jaishankar said.

The Indian leader added that they exchanged perspectives on developments pertaining to the Ukraine conflict. "Looking forward to realizing our extensive cooperation agenda for 2024," Jaishankar said.

In a post on X, Miller said Blinken had a "productive call" with Jaishankar, "discussing U.S.-India partnership for protecting freedom of navigation in critical waterways"*—PTI*

Out & out BJP's political event: Cong on Ram temple

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Hitting out at the BJP, the Congress on Friday said the ruling party has made the Ram temple consecration ceremony an 'out and out political event' which is being held without taking the advice of shankaracharyas and by disregarding religious procedures.

The opposition party also said religion is a personal matter and anyone is free to go to Ayodhya for 'darshan' but the invitation that was declined was for the 22 January event, of which "massive politicisation" is taking place.

Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters here, Congress media and publicity department head Pawan Khera alleged that the consecration ceremony is not being held keeping in mind religious procedures.

"Is it being conducted keeping in mind religious procedures on the advice of the shankaracharyas," Khera asked.

Indigo employees dressed as Lord Ram, Sita and Lakshman during the first flight from Ahmedabad to Ayodhya *PHOTO: X/@ANUSEHGAL*

All four shankaracharyas have said that the consecration ceremony of an "incomplete temple" cannot be done, he said.

Khera further said, "Why will I tolerate workers of a political party becoming middlemen between me and my God?"

He said, "The first question is does one go to God's temple after an invitation. Be it a temple, church or mosque, will we wait for an invitation.

Who will decide on what date and which section of people will go? Will a political party decide?"

Khera alleged the BJP's IT cell has started a campaign against the shankaracharyas.

"There is no dharma and 'aastha' (faith), there is only politics in this (event)," Khera said .*—PTI*

> **Anyone having faith in Lord Ram can visit the Ayodhya temple any day and BJP was attacking his party over the decision to decline the invite to consecration ceremony as part of a conspiracy.**
>
> -Mallikarjun Kharge, Congress president

Lord Ram to get 2.5kg gold bow for consecration

LUCKNOW, 12 JAN

The deity is all set to get a 2.5 kg bow, which is traditionally with him, ahead of the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya on 22 January .This will be given to the Shri Ram Janma Bhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust by Ayodhya-based Amava Ram Temple.

"Ahead of the 'pran pratishtha' of Ram Lalla (Lord Ram) in Ayodhya on 22 January, we are getting bow and arrows for him from Chennai.

On 19 January, these will be donated to the Shri Ram Janma Bhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust," Shayan Kunal, a trustee of the Amava Ram Temple, told PTI. "The bow has been made as per its description mentioned in Valmiki Ramayan. Descriptions about different arrows are also mentioned in it. The skilled Chennai-based artisans, who have been in this profession for the last 200 years, have made the bow. 23 carat of gold has been used to make the bow.

About 600-700 grams of gold has been used to make the bow weighing 2.5 kg," he added.

—PTI

Ayodhya to get drones, 10,000 CCTV cameras

LUCKNOW, 12 JAN

Uttar Pradesh Police will deploy drones and over 10,000 CCTV cameras to ensure security in Ayodhya on the day of the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple.Anti-drone system has also been installed to take control of any unauthorised drone in the vicinity, SP Security Gaurav Vanswal said.Director General DG (law and order) Prashant Kumar said modern technical equipment has also been deployed to help the police force.With the help of this system, it will be easy to take control of any unauthorised drone, he said.The DG said roads leading to the temple town are being sanitised and made encroachment-free. From 17 or 18 January, heavy vehicles will be diverted for which traffic advisory will be issued from time to time. Additional force has also been deployed at railway and bus stations, Kumar said.

—PTI

WE WAITED FOR 33 YEARS, SAYS SISTER OF KOTHARI BROTHERS

KOLKATA, 12 JAN

As the nation awaits the Pran Pratishta ceremony that will mark the inauguration of the Ram Janambhoomi Mandir in Ayodhya, there is one family for whom this occasion is even more special. The Kothari family of Kolkata has waited for this day for long, after all two brothers of the family Ram and Sharad were among the first to hoist the saffron flag on the disputed Babri Mosque on October 30 1990.

Later on 2 November 1990, the then Mulayam Singh government ordered Police forces to open fire on the Kar-Sevaks. Ram and Sharad Kothari were killed becoming martyrs for the cause of Ram Janambhoomi Mandir. Today their sister Poornima has been invited to be a part of the Pran Pratishta cermony on January 22. "This is the first joy in last 33 years. We waited for 33 years after the sacrifice of my brothers, and we are very happy... I have not forgotten anything of what happened to my brothers 33 years ago...Today we are able to see the grand Ram Temple in front of our eyes.." saidPoornima Kothari. *—ANI*

BJP urges Soren to declare 22 Jan as 'dry day'

RANCHI, 12 JAN

The BJP on Friday urged the Jharkhand government to declare a "dry day" on 22 January for the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. In a letter to Chief Minister Hemant Soren, BJP Rajya Sabha MP Deepak Prakash urged for a ban on the sale of liquor and meat on that day in view of "Pran Pratishtha" at the Ram temple."A grand ceremony is scheduled in Ayodhya on 22 January for 'Ram Lala Pran Pratishtha'. Lord Ram is known as 'Maryada Purushottam' and an ideal man due to his conduct, qualities and acts... He was in exile for 14 years... We remember Lord Ram whenever there are talks of culture and good conduct," said Prakash, the former BJP President of Jharkhand.

"I request you to ban the sale of liquor and meat in Jharkhand on 22 January," he added.

Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Assam have already declared 22 January as a "dry day".

—PTI

'Centre wants to demolish all slums in Delhi'

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

The AAP on Friday alleged the BJP-led central government wants to demolish all slums in Delhi. Addressing a press conference, Delhi ministers Atishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj said slums in the national capital are being demolished "in an inhuman manner" without rehabilitating the affected slum dwellers. Atishi alleged that in a meeting on 9 January, the Centre directed land-owning agencies like the Delhi Development Authority and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi to clear all slum clusters in the city. In November, a slum cluster between Sundar Nursery and Delhi Public School inhabited by about 1,000 to 1,500 people, most of whom worked as ragpickers, street hawkers, maids and labourers, was demolished following a court's order.

The slum dwellers had claimed that they were asked to vacate their houses in two days with no offer from the government for relocation. *—PTI*

INDIA to hold talks over seats today

The sources said that discussions would be held on appointing a c onvenor of the Opposition alliance as well *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Top leaders of parties of the opposition INDIA bloc will hold discussions on 13 January on strengthening the alliance, chalking out a strategy on seat-sharing and deciding whether to have a convenor of the grouping, sources said on Friday.

Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee will not be part of the virtual meeting on Saturday morning as she is preoccupied with prior engagements, they said.

The sources said that discussions would be held on appointing a convenor of the opposition alliance. They added that the JDU wants Nitish Kumar as the convenor which is being opposed by the TMC.

This is the second such attempt to hold a virtual meeting as the previous attempt a few days ago did not materialise, the sources added.

A TMC source said the party was informed about the meeting on Friday evening, and the West Bengal chief minister has some pre-scheduled appointments due to which she may not attend. The TMC had also offered that the meeting could be held next week. The source added that the party remains committed to the INDIA bloc and defeating the BJP. As many as 28 Opposition parties have come together under the banner of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) to take on the BJP and defeat it in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. However, there are many issues which are yet to be resolved within the alliance, including that of appointing a convenor. *—PTI*

3 suspended Cong MPs express regret

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Three Congress members of the Lok Sabha, who had reached the Speaker's podium leading to their suspension from the House, on Friday expressed regret for their behaviour to the privileges committee of the lower House.Congress members Abdul Khaleque, J Jayakumar and Vijaykumar Vasanth were suspended from the Lok Sabha during the Winter Session and the matter was referred to the privileges committee.

The three MPs appeared before the committee and expressed regret over their behaviour in the Lok Sabha."The committee has accepted their expression of regret and decided to recommend to the Speaker to revoke their suspension," a parliament source said.

During the Winter Session of the Parliament, 100 opposition members were suspended from the Lok Sabha for unruly behaviour. The Opposition kept up the protests in both Houses of the Parliament demanding a statement from Home Minister Amit Shah on breach in Parliament security on 13 December. *—PTI*

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra to begin from Manipur's Thoubal

IMPHAL, 12 JAN

The Congress on Friday said that the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra will be flagged off from a private ground in Manipur's Thoubal district on 14 January, instead of state capital Imphal.

Congress's Manipur President Keisham Meghachandra said that permission was sought to begin the Yatra from the Hapta Kangjeibung ground in Imphal but the state government gave the go-ahead with certain conditions, forcing to move the venue around 34km at the last moment.

—PTI

Oppn leader Satheesan moves Kerala KC against K-FON

KOCHI, 12 JAN

Leader of Opposition in the state Assembly VD Satheesan on Friday filed a plea with the Kerala High Court, seeking a CBI probe into alleged corruption in awarding contracts for the Left government's K-FON project, which offers free internet connectivity to the poor.

In a plea filed, Satheesan alleged that there was a major delay in implementing the Kerala Fibre Optic Network (K-FON).

The Congress leader alleged that a project that would have become a milestone has been handed over to those without the required qualifications for its implementation.

Satheesan sought a CBI probe alleging that there was corruption in awarding the contracts and subcontracts for project implementation.

VD Satheesan *PHOTO: PTI*

- K-FON, launched last year, aims to provide free internet to around 20 lakh economically weak families, and at an affordable rate to others.

The plea is likely to be heard sometime next week.

K-FON, launched last year, aims to provide free internet to around 20 lakh economically weak families, and at an affordable rate to others.

The government had earlier said that over 18,000 government offices in the state have been provided internet facilities through the Rs 1,500-crore K-FON project.

K-FON is Kerala's own internet service, through which the government hopes to help strengthen digital infrastructure in the state. Kerala is the first state to declare the Internet as a fundamental right of the citizen. A consortium of public sector companies including Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and Railtel, along with certain private companies, is executing the project.

—PTI

'SENA (UBT) MUST FOLLOW WHIP ISSUED BY SPEAKER'

MUMBAI, 12 JAN

Maharashtra Speaker Rahul Narwekar on Friday said there is only one Shiv Sena legislative party in the state legislature and its MLAs will have to adhere to the whip issued by Chief Minister Eknath Shinde-led camp's whip Bharat Gogavale, recognised by him.

Speaking to a news channel, Narwekar said he has diligently followed the Supreme Court's guidelines while giving his judgment on the cross-petitions by Sena factions seeking disqualification of each other's MLAs following a split in the party in 2022, and his decision is "tenable".

Narwekar has come under intense criticism from the Opposition, especially the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) for recognising the Shinde outfit as the "real" Shiv Sena. Thackeray has termed the verdict a "murder of democracy" and said his party will move the Supreme Court against it.

"I had to decide which of the two groups in the legislature represents the original political party. No party can have two whips. So MLAs of that (other) group have to adhere to the whip recognised by me," Narwekar said.

When asked whether the Sena (UBT) group exists before him, Narwekar said, "There is only Shiv Sena legislative party before the speaker."

"Whip of the legislative party to which the Thackeray camp MLAs belong will be applicable to them," he said. *—PTI*

LONG-STANDING DISPUTE

Mizo forms new boundary panel for Assam border dispute

AIZAWL, 12 JAN

The ZPM government in Mizoram has constituted a new boundary committee to handle issues related to the state's border dispute with neighbouring Assam, a home department official said on Friday.

The committee is headed by Home Minister K Sapdanga, while Environment, Forest and Climate Change Minister Lalthansanga is the vice chairman of the panel, according to a recent notification.

Home Commissioner and Secretary H Lalengmawia was made the member secretary, he said.

Other members of the committee include advisor to the Chief Minister (political) Lalmuanpuia Punte, Chief Secretary Renu Sharma, Director General of Police (DGP) Anil Shukla, and Joseph K Lalfakzuala, an assistant professor at state-run T Romana College.

Besides, one member each from political parties included in the committee.

Chief Minister of Mizoram Lalduhoma *PHOTO: PTI*

Also, one representative each from the NGO Coordination Committee, Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA), Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), Mizoram Upa Pawl (MUP) or Mizoram Elders' Association, Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) or Mizo Women Federation, Mizo Students' Union (MSU) and Joint Action Committee on Inner Line Reserve Forest Demand are part of the committee.

The notification stated that the committee's chairman, Sapdanga, can invite any person he considers necessary to its meeting.

With the formation of the new committee, the previous boundary panel constituted by the MNF government now stands disbanded.

Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma is likely to meet his Assam counterpart Himanta Biswa Sharma this month to discuss the border issue between the two states, officials said.

A discussion between them is expected during the North Eastern Council (NEC) plenary session to be held in Meghalaya's capital Shillong on 19 January, they said.

The two leaders will discuss the border issue to resolve the long-standing dispute, the officials said.

The proposed NEC plenary session will be chaired by Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

—PTI

BJP, Congress, Mizo National Front (MNF), Zoram People's Movement (ZPM), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have also been

Three fresh Covid deaths recorded across country

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

India has recorded 609 new cases of Covid, while the number of active cases of the infection has declined to 3,368, the health ministry said on Friday.Three deaths -- two in Kerala and one in Karnataka -- have been reported in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8 am. The number of daily cases had dropped to double-digits till December 5, 2023 but cases began to increase after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions. After 5 December, 841 new cases were reported on 31 December, 2023 which was 0.2 per cent of the peak cases reported in May 2021.A large majority of these (around 92 per cent) are recovering under home isolation."The currently available data suggests that the JN.1 variant is neither leading to an exponential rise in new cases nor a surge in hospitalisation and mortality," the official source stated. *—PTI*

12 fishermen rescued off Kerala coast

KOCHI, 12 JAN

The Indian Coast Guard has successfully rescued a Kochi-based fishing boat, along with 12 fishermen, from sinking due to underwater hull damage and uncontrolled flooding, an official release on Friday said.The release said that on January 11 the distressed boat 'Sanju', from Munambam harbour near Kochi "experienced water ingress" prompting a distress call to the ICG, who successfully rescued the boat from approximately 22 miles off Ponnani coast.ICG received a distress call on Thursday and promptly deployed the vessel ICGS Aryaman, boats C-404 and C-144, and a Coast Guard Advanced Light Helicopter." *—PTI*

Man, 2 kids found dead inside house in Kerala

KOLLAM, 12 JAN

A 35-year-old man and two children were found dead inside their house near here, police said on Friday.Police said Jose Pramod had allegedly murdered his two sons -- Devanarayanan ,9, Devananda,7 and then died by suicide at his house near Pattathanam area."The incident came to light when Pramod's father-in-law came to the house this morning. As he found the door locked from inside, he alerted the neighbours," a police officer said.The police forcefully opened the doors and found the three lifeless bodies."His (Pramod) wife is a doctor and was on duty at the time of the incident," the police officer said.The children were found hanging, while Pramod was found dead in another room.It is suspected that Pramod murdered the children before killing himself, the officer added.A probe into the incident has been initiated by the police. *—PTI*

Pench Tiger Reserve becomes India's first Dark Sky Park

NAGPUR, 12 JAN

Pench Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Maharashtra has earned the title of the first Dark Sky Park in India and fifth in Asia for protecting the night sky and preventing light pollution, making the facility ideal for astronomy enthusiasts. Recognising the intrinsic value of the night sky as a natural, cultural, and historical resource, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) emphasises the importance of preserving natural darkness for the sake of nature conservation, ecological integrity in protected areas, and the well-being of communities in healthy cities, said Prabhu Nath Shukla, deputy director of PTR Maharashtra.The escalating global threat of light pollution poses a substantial risk to this invaluable resource, he stated in a release.The Dark and Quiet Skies for Science and Society Working Group, led by the International Astronomical Union, has recommended the establishment of 'Dark Sky Oases' by national and local governments, Shukla said.He said the Dark Sky Place certification focuses on lighting policy, dark sky-friendly retrofits, outreach and education, and monitoring the night sky. *—PTI*

Flight-test of AKASH missile successful

BALASORE, 12 JAN

PHOTO: PTI

India on Friday conducted a successful flight test of the new generation AKASH missile from the Integrated Test Range (ITR), Chandipur off the coast of Odisha, officials said.

The flight test was conducted by DRDO against a high-speed unmanned aerial target at very low altitude. During the flight test, the target was successfully intercepted by the weapon system and destroyed, they said.

"It has validated the functioning of the complete weapon system consisting of the missile with indigenously developed Radio Frequency Seeker, Launcher, Multi-Function Radar and Command, Control&Communication system", the officials said.

The system performance was also validated through the data captured by a number of radars, telemetry and electro-optical tracking system deployed by ITR, Chandipur.

The flight test was witnessed by senior officials from DRDO, Indian Air Force (IAF), Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL).

The AKASH-NG system is a state-of-the-art missile system capable of intercepting high-speed, agile aerial threats.

The successful flight test has paved the way for user trials.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has complimented the DRDO, IAF, PSUs and the industry for the flight test.

The successful development of the system will further enhance the air defence capabilities of the country, he said.

Secretary, Department of Defence R&D and Chairman DRDO Dr Samir V Kamat also congratulated the teams associated with the successful flight test of AKASH-NG. *—PTI*

SC junks plea to expedite Women's Reservation Law

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Supreme Court on 12 January refused to entertain a plea filed by an advocate seeking urgent and time-bound implementation of the women's reservation law to ensure 33 per cent quota for them in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

A Bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta, however, granted liberty to the advocate Yogamaya MG to file an intervention petition in a pending PIL filed by Congress leader Jaya Thakur.

"Look, we don't want multiplicity of litigation in the matter. You file an intervention application in the petition filed by Jaya Thakur," the Bench sThe petition filed by Yogamaya contended there is an urgent need for timely implementation of the new law in the upcoming general elections because, without expeditious action, its intended benefits for women in the political arena will be lost.

"The Women's Reservation Act, 2023 was passed with uncertainty in its implementation. That the petitioner seeks the intervention of this court to ensure that the Constitutional mandate of fair representation for women is expeditiously realised," it said.

Officially known as Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, the law provides for reservation of one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies for women.

The law will, however, not be implemented immediately.

It will come into force after a new census has been conducted based on which delimitation will be undertaken to reserve seats for women. *—PTI*

New CEC, ECs law gets SC nod

Oppn accused Modi govt of defying SC by dropping CJI from the panel

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Supreme Court on Friday refused to stay the new law that provides for appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners by a panel excluding the Chief Justice of India. A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta, however, agreed to examine a batch of petitions challenging the new law and issued notice to the Centre.

The bench asked senior advocate Vikas Singh, appearing for Congress leader Jaya Thakur, who sought a stay on the new law, to serve a copy of the petition to the Centre's counsel.

"Please stay this law. This is against the separation of powers," Singh said.

The bench told Singh, "No, without hearing the other side, we can't. We will issue a notice."

Several petitions, including Thakur's, have been filed in the apex court amid a political row over dropping the chief justice of India (CJI) from a panel empowered to choose the chief election commissioner (CEC) and election commissioners (ECs).

Advocate Gopal Singh has also moved the top court, seeking quashing of the new law that accords the central government sweeping powers to make appointments to the poll body.

The plea filed by Singh has sought the apex court's direction to implement an "independent and transparent system of selection, constituting a neutral and independent selection committee for appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners (CEC and ECs)".

The new law states, "Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall be appointed by the President on the recommendation of a Selection Committee consisting of - (a) the Prime Minister - Chairperson; (b) the Leader of Opposition in the House of the People - Member; (c) a Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister - Member."

The Opposition has accused the Modi government of having defied the Supreme Court by dropping the CJI from the selection panel.

In its March 2023 order, the Supreme Court had said the prime minister, the leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha, and the CJI would pick the CEC and the ECs. *—PTI*

Earlier, Supreme Court had said that the Prime Minister, the leader of the Opposition, and the CJI would pick the CEC and the ECs PHOTO: PTI

Dense fog to haunt North for 5 days: IMD

IMD said that no significant change in minimum temperatures is very likely over Northwest India during the next five days PHOTO: PTI

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

There seems to be no immediate respite from the bone-chilling cold wave and fog which will continue for the next few days, said the India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Friday.

IMD said the cold wave to severe cold wave conditions are likely over North India during the next two days while cold day to severe day wave conditions are likely over the plains of Northwest India during the next three days and then the conditions will abate thereafter.

The IMD also predicted that dense to very dense fog conditions are likely to continue to prevail over North India during the next five days.In its daily bulletin, the weather forecast agency said that minimum temperatures are in the range of 3-7 degree Celsius over most parts of Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, Rajasthan, in some parts of Uttar Pradesh, south Rajasthan, north Madhya Pradesh and in isolated pockets of Bihar.

"These are below normal by (-)1 degree Celsius to (-) 3 degree Celsius at many places of north India. Today, the lowest minimum temperature of 1.4 degree Celsius reported at Amritsar (Punjab)," said the IMD.

It also said that cold wave to severe cold wave conditions prevailed in isolated pockets of East Rajasthan, Punjab and cold wave condition in isolated pockets of Haryana and West Rajasthan.

"Gradual fall by 2-3 degree Celsius in minimum temperatures is likely over many parts of Central and East India during the next 2-3 days and no significant change thereafter.

However, no significant change in minimum temperatures is very likely over Northwest India during the next five days," said the IMD.Cold wave to severe cold wave conditions are very likely to continue in isolated pockets of Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh and Delhi on Friday and Saturday and cold wave conditions in isolated pockets on Sunday. *—IANS*

SC sends notice to MP HC for sacking 6 judges

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Supreme Court has taken cognisance of termination of services of six women civil judges by the Madhya Pradesh government for their unsatisfactory performance.

A bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Sanjay Karol took note of the application of three of the six former judges addressed to the Supreme Court and decided to treat it as a writ petition.

The bench appointed advocate Gaurav Agarwal as amicus curiae to assist in the matter. According to the office report of the case uploaded on the apex court website, the application by three former Civil Judges, class-II (Junior Division) from Madhya Pradesh State Judicial Service has been addressed to the apex court.

They said the termination happened despite the fact that quantitative assessment of their work could not done on account of Covid outbreak.

"It is further submitted that the officers along with three other female officers were appointed in Judicial Services in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

They are alleged to be terminated from service primarily on account of disposal not being up to the standards set," the office report said.

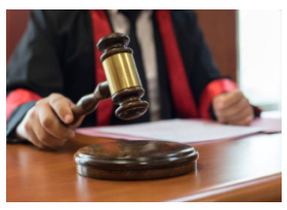


PHOTO:PTI

- The termination orders were passed in June 2023 by the state law department after an administrative committee and a full court meeting found their performance during the probation period unsatisfactory

The termination orders were passed in June 2023 by the state law department after an administrative committee and a full court meeting found their performance during the probation period unsatisfactory.

According to an impleadment application filed by one of the former judges through advocate Charu Mathur, despite having an unblemished service record of four years and not having suffered any adverse remarks, she was terminated without following any due process of law.

She alleged her termination was a violation of her fundamental rights under Articles 14 (right to equality before law) and 21 (right to life and personal liberty) of the Constitution .

She said in her application that if the period of her maternity as well as child care leave is taken into consideration in the quantitative work assessment, it will cause grave injustice to her. *—PTI*

5 HELD IN ₹56K CR BANK FRAUD CASE

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

The Enforcement Directorate(ED)has arrested five people in connection with an alleged Rs 56,000 crore bank loan fraud linked money laundering case against erstwhile Bhushan Steel Ltd (BSL), official sources said Friday.

Those taken into custody on Thursday are Pankaj Kumar Tiwari, the former vice president banking of the company, former VP accounts Pankaj Kumar Agarwal, ex-chief financial officer Nitin Johri, Ajay Mittal, the brother-in-law of former promoter Neeraj Singal, and Ajay Mittal's wife and sister of Neeraj Singal, Archana Mittal.

Bhushan Steel was taken over by Tata Steel Ltd in 2018.Bhushan Steel Limited's former Managing Director Neeraj Singal and his associates formed several shell companies and the promoters and entities linked to BSL "rotated funds from one company to another through a chain of multiple entities" as part of an alleged bank loan fraud.

The case stems from a charge sheet filed by the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO), an investigative agency under the ministry of corporate affairs. *—PTI*

Solution on sugarcane policy after April: Min

PUNE, 12 JAN

Union Transport minister Nitin Gadkari on Friday assured sugar mill owners that a solution to their problems owing to the government's policy on the use of sugar for ethanol production will be found after April, and they should not worry.

India will one day become an exporter of energy and there was a need to develop agriculture for this to happen, he said, speaking at the International Sugarcane Conference organized by the Vasantdada Sugar Institute here. The institute is headed by NCP Chief Sharad Pawar.

The Union government last year banned the use of sugarcane juice for making ethanol, but later reversed the decision by allowing the use of sugarcane juice as well as B-heavy molasses to produce the green fuel but capped the diversion of sugar at 17 lakh tonnes.

Gadkari said the sugar industry should give more importance to ethanol production.

The future of the sugar industry was very good with its allied products, Gadkari said. *—PTI*

Note in Suchana Seth's bag implies she was frustrated: Cops

PANAJI, 12 JAN

A crumpled note, written with eyeliner, recovered from a bag belonging to Suchana Seth indicates that she was upset over the custody of her four-year-old son, whom she allegedly put to death, a Goa police official said on Friday.

Seth,39, was arrested on Monday night for killing her son in a service apartment at Candolim in North Goa. She and her husband are estranged and their divorce proceedings are currently underway.

A senior police official said that a crumpled note, scribbled with eyeliner on a tissue paper, was found in her bag. "We would not like to disclose the content of the note but it indicates that she was upset over the custody of her child," he said.

Suchana Seth PHOTO: PTI

- The note was not found in the bag where she had stuffed her son's body after killing him, he said. A court had granted visitation rights to her husband Venkat Raman which had not gone down well with the accused

The note was not found in the bag where she had stuffed her son's body after killing him, he said.

Police said that a court had granted visitation rights to her husband Venkat Raman which had not gone down well with the accused. *—PTI*

'EVERY TRAIN PASSENGER GETS 55% CONCESSION'

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Every passenger gets 55 per cent concession on train journeys, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said regarding demands to restore pre-Covid fare concessions for senior citizens and media people.Without giving any direct reply to questions by media people on the restoration of concessions, Vaishnaw said, "The Indian Railway is already offering 55 per cent concession on train fares to every train passenger."Vaishnaw was in Ahmedabad to review the progress of the ongoing bullet train project among other things.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown imposed in March 2020, the Railways offered 50 per cent concession on train fares to senior citizens and government-accredited journalists.

Railway operations were completely shut down during the lockdown but when its full-fledged resumption in June 2022, the Railway Ministry didn't restore these concessions and since then the issue has been raised on various platforms, including in both houses of parliament.On Thursday, when media people raised it during a press briefing in Ahmedabad, Vaishnaw said, "If a train ticket to a destination costs Rs 100, Railway is charging only Rs 45. It is giving Rs 55 concession."

Earlier the Indian Railways said that it earned about Rs 2,242 crore fin the financial year 2022-23. *—PTI*

BILKIS BANO EYEWITNESS SAYS

'Convicts should be hanged or kept in jail'

AHMEDABAD, 12 JAN

The only eyewitness in the Bilkis Bano case has said that the individuals convicted for the gruesome crime must be hanged or jailed for the remainder of their lives and only then would justice be served. The eyewitness was seven when a mob attacked his cousin Bilkis Bano and other members of the minority community in Limkheda taluka of Gujarat's Dahod district. He is now 28 years old and lives in Ahmedabad with his wife and 5-year-old son.

On 8 January this year, the Supreme Court quashed the Gujarat government's decision, taken in August 2022, to prematurely release 11 convicts facing life term for the gang rape of Bilkis Bano and the murder of 14 people.

"All the convicts must be either hanged for or they must be kept behind bars for the remainder of their lives. Only then justice will be served. These men must never be set free again," he asserted.

After the Godhra train burning incident on 27 February, 2002, to save themselves, a group of 17 people, mostly women and children, left Randhikpur village and headed towards Devgadh Baria town via a forest, said a social activist who gave shelter to that boy.

"Bilkis Bano along with this boy (eyewitness) and his mother and elder sister were also in that group, which was attacked by a mob on 3 March.Of those 17, the mob killed 14, including an infant, and then gang-raped Bilkis. They also tried to kill Bilkis and this boy but they survived. A 4-year-old boy also survived the attack after the mob left thinking everyone was dead," said the activist seeking anonymity.

The boy spent some time in a relief camp in Godhra after the incident and was then shifted by him to a residential school in Kutch, said the activist who became his guardian.

"Since he was the only eyewitness, he testified before a special CBI court in 2005 in Mumbai. His testimony proved crucial because it matched the sequence of events narrated by complainant Bilkis Bano. He also identified four of the 11 accused during the hearing," the activist said. *—PTI*

BLOOD AND GRIEF

A Palestinian man, wounded in an Israeli strike, receives treatment in al-Aqsa hospital, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip.
PHOTO: REUTERS

How is B'desh's election result beneficial to India

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party won a landslide victory in Bangladesh's general election last Sunday, a result that was widely expected as the polls were boycotted by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies.

The Awami League secured 223 of the country's 300 parliamentary seats.

Hasina will be prime minister for the fifth time in total, and the fourth time in a row, making her the world's longest-serving female head of government.

India has welcomed the results, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulating Hasina on her victory.

"We are committed to further strengthen our enduring and people-centric partnership with Bangladesh," Modi wrote on X, formerly Twitter, earlier this week.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina ***PHOTO: PTI***

Bangladesh and India have mutual interests

Hasina's victory in Bangladesh is important for India's security interests, according to analysts.

The countries share a 4,100-kilometer-long (2,500-mile) porous border, which is an easy pathway for infiltration, human trafficking and terrorist elements. Bangladesh shares the border with the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

"Given the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, it becomes more important that India and Bangladesh remain close security partners," C Raja Mohan, a foreign policy expert and visiting research professor at Singapore's Institute of South Asian Studies, told DW.

Myanmar's civil war, with a rebel offensive posing a threat to the miliary junta's grip on power, has led to growing concerns about a spillover of tensions into border areas in India's northeast.

"Given the fact that India's 'neighborhood first' policy is in a quandary, the Awami League's return to power provides some level of stability on the eastern front. This is important given- the continuing turmoil in Myanmar, which has its intense ramification in the northeastern states like Manipur," said Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, the founder of independent research forum Mantraya.

Looking at the greater region, Mohan said India would like Bangladesh to become a fulcrum for regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal littoral linking South and Southeast Asia."At the end of the day, New Delhi's main consideration is that Bangladesh, or for that matter, any neighbor, does not do anything that hurts India's security. That is the red line that Dhaka under Hasina has respected," added Mohan.

India 'unconcerned' with democratic backslide in Bangladesh

D'Souza believes there were no surprises in the election results, given that the BNP had already boycotted the vote.

"New Delhi remains unconcerned about the backsliding of democracy in Bangladesh, given the fact that Hasina's overwhelming victory assures the continuation of strong ties," she said.

India "had rooted for such an outcome and had expressed opposition to attempts by the US to press Dhaka on human rights issues as well as Sheikh Hasina's authoritarianism," D'Souza added.

Critics have said Hasina has tried to turn Bangladesh into a one-party state and that her crackdown on political opponents and civil society groups has been severe.

"However, domestic political stability will remain elusive in Bangladesh, despite the election results in favor of the Awami League," D'Souza told DW.

"This may translate to a significant level of political violence and chaos and their cumulative impact on Bangladesh's slowing economy. All these can have potential repercussions on India's security," she added.Foreign policy expert Mohan said that despite concerns over democratic backsliding, alternatives to Hasina are seen as a "bigger threat" to "peace and prosperity in the region."Anil Wadhwa, a former Indian ambassador, said India hopes for continuity in its strong ties with Bangladesh under Hasina's leadership."India will look forward to an overall improvement in the relationship with Bangladesh and expects that economic and defense ties will increase by leaps and bounds," said Wadhwa.

Balancing India and China

In recent years, both India and China have expanded their economic stakes in Bangladesh, which is being folded into the two countries' growing geopolitical rivalry.The big question is how Dhaka will continue to manage the competing expectations of both countries.

—Courtesy, DW News

SALAR ساڈھ

US-led strikes on Yemeni rebels throw light on war

US-led airstrikes on Yemen's Houthi rebels in response to their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea pulled the world's focus Friday back on the years long war raging in the Arab world's poorest nation, even as shipping across the wider Mideast remains threatened.

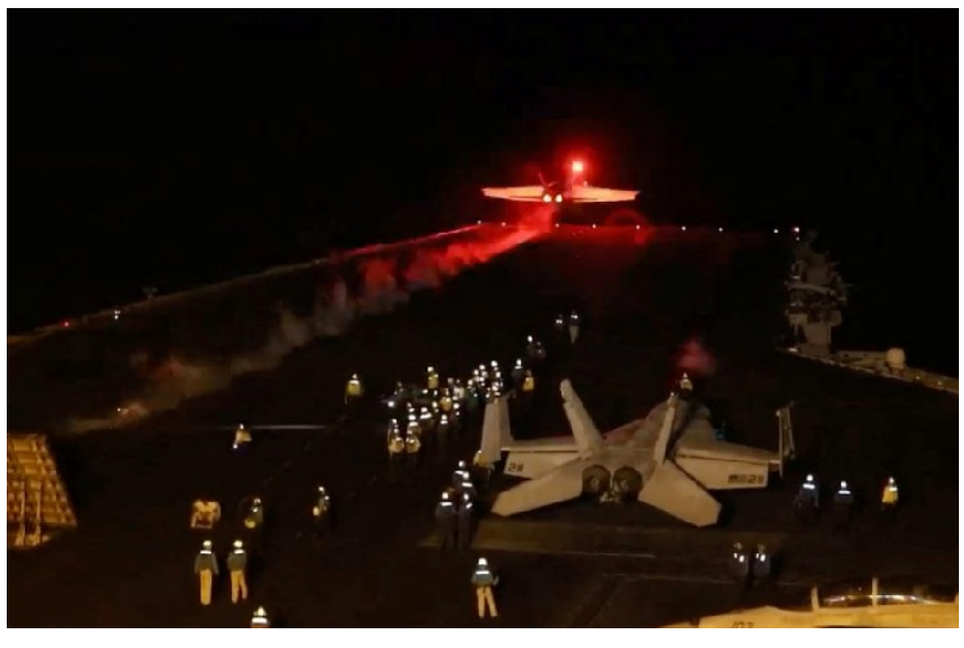
As the bombing lit the predawn sky over multiple sites held by the Iranian-backed rebels, Saudi Arabia quickly sought to distance itself from the attacks as it seeks to maintain a delicate detente with Iran and a cease-fire in the Yemen war from which it hopes to finally withdraw. The strikes also threatened to ignite a regional conflict over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, something the Biden administration and its allies have been trying to calm for weeks. Meanwhile, the US Navy acknowledged an attack days earlier on a ship in the far reaches of the Indian Ocean — an attack that may signal Iran's willingness to strike vessels as part of a wider maritime campaign over Israel's war on Hamas. Tehran on Thursday separately seized another tanker involved in an earlier crisis over America seizing oil targeted by international sanctions on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. It remained unclear how extensive the damage from the US strikes were, though the Houthis said at least five sites including airfields had been attacked. Hussein al-Ezzi, a Houthi official in their Foreign Ministry, acknowledged "a massive aggressive attack by American and British ships, submarines and warplanes." "America and Britain will undoubtedly have to prepare to pay a

- The strikes also threatened to ignite a regional conflict over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip

heavy price and bear all the dire consequences of this blatant aggression," al-Ezzi wrote online. Mohammed Abdul-Salam, the Houthis' chief negotiator and spokesperson, separately described the US and Britain as having "committed foolishness with this treacherous aggression." "They were wrong if they thought that they would deter Yemen from supporting Palestine and Gaza," he wrote online.

Houthi "targeting will continue to affect Israeli ships or those heading to the ports of occupied Palestine," he wrote.Since the attacks began in November, however, the Houthis have begun targeting vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for global trade.Yemen has been targeted by US military action over the last four American presidencies. A campaign of drone strikes began under President George W. Bush to target the local affiliate of al-Qaida, attacks that have continued under the Biden administration. Meanwhile, the US has launched raids and other military operations amid the ongoing war in Yemen.That war began when the Houthis swept into the capital, Sanaa, in 2014. A Saudi-led coalition including the United Arab Emirates launched a war to back Yemen's exiled government in 2015, quickly morphing the conflict into a regional confrontation as Iran backed the Houthis with weapons and other support. That war, however, has slowed as the Houthis maintain their grip on the territory they hold. The UAE even came under Houthi missile fire multiple times in 2022. After the Emirates left the war, Saudi Arabia reached a Chinese-mediated deal with Iran to ease tensions in hopes of finally withdrawing from the war.However, an overall deal has yet to be reached, likely sparking Saudi Arabia's expression Friday of "great concern" over the airstrikes."While the kingdom stresses the importance of preserving the security and stability of the Red Sea region, ... it calls for restraint and avoiding escalation," its Foreign Ministry said in a statement.Iran, which has supplied weapons and aid to the Houthis, condemned the attack in a statement from Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani."Arbitrary attacks will have no result other than fueling insecurity and instability in the region," he said. The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, also backed by Iran and engaged in cross-border fire with Israel, criticized the strikes as showing America as being a "full partner in catastrophes and massacres committed by the Zionist entity in Gaza."

Meanwhile Friday, the US Navy confirmed an attack days earlier near the coasts of India and Sri Lanka. The chemical tanker Pacific Gold was struck 4 January by what the Navy called "an Iranian one-way attack" drone, causing some damage to the vessel but no injuries."Iran's actions are contrary to international law and threaten maritime security and stability," said Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, the head of the Navy's Mideast-based 5th Fleet. *—PTI*



An aircraft takes off to join the US -led coalition to conduct air strikes against military targets in Yemen, aimed at the Iran-backed Houthi militia that has been targeting international shipping in the Red Sea
PHOTO: REUTERS

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Will India, the 'sleeping giant' of football, wake up?

For decades, India has lived with the label of being the "sleeping giant" of football.

With a population of 1.4 billion, highest in the world, there is a prevailing sentiment that India is underrepresented in international football.

Compared to its dominance in cricket, the country lags far behind in football and is yet to qualify for a FIFA World Cup.

While former FIFA president Sepp Blatter optimistically declared in 2012 that the "sleeping giant is starting to wake up," the reality in 2024 paints a different picture.

Currently placed 102nd in the FIFA rankings and not even among the top 10 sides in Asia, India is still in the midst of its football awakening and struggling to emerge from its slumber, experts argue.

"India is not a giant in football because they haven't done anything on the international front for years," Stephen Constantine, former head coach of the Indian men's football team, told Al Jazeera.

Indian football basked in glory in the 1950s and 1960s, clinching gold at the 1951 and 1962 Asian Games and securing a commendable fourth-place finish at the 1956 Summer Olympics.

However, since that illustrious period, India's performance on the continental stage has been lacklustre, with the team failing to progress past the group stage at the Asian Cup in 1984, 2011 and 2019.

During their last campaign in 2019, the team raised fans' expectations with a 4-1 win over Thailand in the opening game, but losses against the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain meant India missed qualifying for the next round once again.

Now under coach Igor Stimac, India faces a tricky campaign at the Asian Cup, where the men in blue are grouped with teams ranked above them: Australia, Syria and Uzbekistan.

The team's fearless approach under Stimac has impressed fans, but the coach sparked controversy in November when he said "I don't consider the Asian Cup as such an important tournament".

Constantine, who took charge of India in 2002-05 and 2015-19, was surprised at Stimac's remarks.

"It's the biggest tournament that India is going to play. What is more important than that?" Constantine said.

Veteran captain and forward Sunil Chhetri will lead India at the AFC Asian Cup 2023 ***PHOTO: AP***

'Damage limitation against Australia'

India's 26-member squad for the Asian Cup is led by the country's highest goal-scorer, Sunil Chhetri, and includes the same core group of players that Stimac has worked with since taking over. All squad members play for clubs in the Indian Super League (ISL), the country's top division.

Pradhyum Reddy, an Indian football coach, expects fans to have high hopes for Stimac's side at the Asian Cup, but says the road to results will not be easy.India's campaign opener is against Australia, which reached the round of 16 at the Qatar World Cup 2022 before being knocked out by eventual champions Argentina.

"Australia are seasoned opponents who have got their core group playing in Europe," Reddy told Al Jazeera.

"But the difference is that under Stimac, India plays on the front foot, so players will try and press Australia and make life difficult for them – maybe even cause them a few problems, but I don't think we will get any joy out of that game.

"It should be about damage limitation against Australia. Don't lose by more than what the others did," added Reddy.

Former player Darren Caldeira believes his country's best chance of earning points will be against 91st-ranked Syria, as Uzbekistan (ranked 68th) could present tougher challenges."No one is talking too much about Uzbekistan, but they are a rising powerhouse in central Asia," Caldeira told Al Jazeera. "They have some really good players, especially, Abdukodir Khusanov," he added, referring to the 19-year-old Uzbek defender who plays for Ligue 1 club Lens in France.

The gulf is getting bigger

In the lead-up to the Asian Cup, India won three tournaments in 2023, including the SAFF Championship in July, which featured eight teams from South Asia.

Apart from Kyrgyzstan, all opponents that India faced across the three tournaments are ranked below it. This highlights India's tendency to play against weaker-ranked opponents – a longstanding concern in Indian football."We need to play more games against better-ranked nations," said former midfielder Caldeira, who is now the director of football at top-tier Indian club Bengaluru FC."Maybe there has been an apprehension in the past, fearing the result, but for us to improve we must take risks and challenge ourselves against quality opponents," he added. Reddy, CEO of third-tier Indian club Dempo, said the team's Asian Cup qualification and other achievements mask the issues plaguing the sport at home."We've improved significantly in the last decade ... But comparatively, I don't think we've improved as much as other regional teams including Uzbekistan, Thailand and Vietnam," Reddy said."And certainly not as much as Japan or South Korea – the gulf has got bigger."Japan is currently the top-ranked Asian side followed by Iran and South Korea in second and third respectively, while Australia and Saudi Arabia make up the top five. India is 18th on the list.

Former India coach Constantine blamed India's slow progress on a lack of player development.

"When I came to India in 2002, I realised that there is talent but we weren't looking for it in the right places. And when we did, we weren't developing them. This is why India has not gone to the heights we imagined," said Constantine, the current Pakistan coach."At the moment, when you look at the big picture, we don't dominate in the region. So, if you are not dominating in the region, how do you expect to dominate elsewhere?"

'It's comical how little football we play'

Poor quality of coaching at various levels, absence of a robust league and a lack of game time for players have hampered the progress of domestic football. Constantine, an UEFA Pro Licence holder and FIFA instructor, emphasised the impact of poor coaching on India's future and questioned the nation's reliance on foreign coaches who may not prioritise the development of local talent.

—Al Jazeera

Australia police foil plot to kill OneFour group rappers

SYDNEY, 12 JAN

Australian police have charged two men over an alleged plot to kill four members of the rap group OneFour. The men, named in media reports as Brandon Maseuli and Yousef Rima, are part of an international criminal syndicate that originated in Lebanon.Police said the group takes on contracts to carry out violent crimes such as murders and kidnappings. Arrested in Sydney on Thursday, Maseuli, 26, and Rima, 20, have been handed multiple charges. They include conspiracy to murder, kidnapping, directing a criminal group, and various drug and robbery-related offences.

Police said Maseuli and Rima had conspired to murder "four high-profile men from Sydney's northwest on behalf of another network". The plot against the OneFour members is believed to have been sparked by a conflict between the rappers and the group that allegedly hired the criminal syndicate's Sydney cell, the Sydney Morning Herald said.

—BBC NEWS

SC raps Pak's EC over Imran's 'bat symbol' case

ISLAMABAD, 12 JAN

Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Qazi Faez Isa on Friday said that Supreme Court would not "take over" the job of Election Commission, as it took up the poll body's petition challenging the Peshawar High Court's decision to restore jailed former premier Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf party's bat' election symbol.

A three-member bench comprising CJP Isa, Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar, and Justice Musarrat Hilali heard the case. Responding to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) counsel Hamid Khan's arguments, Justice Isa noted that there was a "very clear line of demarcation" between the functions of a constitutional and a statutory body. He remarked, "If they're (ECP) doing their job, we won't take over their job [or] how to do it [or] how better to do it." At one point during the hearing, CJP Isa observed, "Election commission is not just a quasi-judicial body. It is a constitutional body." *—PTI*

Pakistan terrorist Harwinder Rinda's key aide arrested

CHANDIGARH, 12 JAN

A key operative of Pakistan-based terrorist Harvinder Rinda, who was supplying weapons to associates of a terror outfit to carry out "sensational crimes" in Punjab, has been arrested, Director General of Police Gaurav Yadav said on Friday. A Chinese pistol and eight live cartridges have been recovered from him, the DGP said. "Preliminary interrogation has revealed that the accused Khichan, on the directions of terrorist Rinda, was supplying weapons to the associates of terrorist outfit Babbar Khalistan International (BKI) to carry out sensational crimes in the State," he added. *—PTI*

Huge ancient city found in Amazon

BRASÍLIA, 12 JAN

A huge ancient city has been found in the Amazon, hidden for thousands of years by lush vegetation. The discovery changes what we know about the history of people living in the Amazon. The houses and plazas in the Upano area in eastern Ecuador were connected by an astounding network of roads and canals. The area lies in the shadow of a volcano that created rich local soils but also may have led to the destruction of the society. While we knew about cities in the highlands of South America, like Machu Picchu in Peru, it was believed that people only lived nomadically or in tiny settlements in the Amazon. The city was built around 2,500 years ago, and people lived there for up to 1,000 years, according to archaeologists. It is difficult to accurately estimate how many people lived there at any one time, but scientists say it is certainly in the 10,000s i. *—BBC News*

Houthis vow retaliation after US, UK strikes in Yemen

The 73 strikes in 5 regions have killed at least 5 & wounded 6

DUBAI, 12 JAN

The leader of Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels threatened retaliation after US and UK-led airstrikes on them in response to their attacks on Red Sea shipping.

This pulled the world's focus Friday back on the years-long war raging there, even as tensions rise across a Middle East already torn by Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The strikes killed at least five people and wounded six, the Houthis said.

As the bombing lit the predawn sky over multiple sites held by the Iranian-backed rebels, Saudi Arabia quickly sought to distance itself from the attacks as it seeks to maintain a delicate detente with Iran and a ceasefire in the Yemen war from which it hopes to finally withdraw.

The attack also threatened to ignite a regional conflict over Israel's war on Hamas, which the Biden administration and its allies have been trying to calm for weeks.

Meanwhile, the US Navy acknowledged an attack days earlier on a ship in the far reaches of the Indian Ocean an attack that may signal Iran's willingness to strike vessels as part of a wider maritime campaign over the Israel-Hamas conflict.

A US fighter jet prepares to take off in an overnight strike against more than 60 Houthi targets in Yemen *PHOTO: REUTERS*

Tehran on Thursday separately seized another tanker involved in an earlier crisis over America seizing oil targeted by international sanctions on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

It remained unclear how extensive the damage from the US strikes were, though the Houthis said at least five sites, including airfields, had been attacked.

United Kingdom described its strikes hitting a site in Bani allegedly used by the Houthis to launch drones and an airfield in Abbs used to launch cruise missiles and drones.

Hussein al-Ezzi, a Houthi official in their Foreign Ministry, acknowledged "a massive aggressive attack by American and British ships, submarines and warplanes."

Mohammed Abdul-Salam, the Houthis' chief negotiator and spokesperson, separately described the US and Britain as having "committed foolishness with this treacherous aggression."

- As the bombing lit the predawn sky over multiple sites held by the Iranian-backed rebels, Saudi Arabia quickly sought to distance itself from the attacks as it seeks to maintain a delicate detente with Iran

"They were wrong if they thought that they would deter Yemen from supporting Palestine and Gaza," he wrote online. Houthi "targeting will continue to affect Israeli ships or those heading to the ports of occupied Palestine," he wrote.

Since the attacks began in November, however, the Houthis have begun targeting vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperilling shipping in a key route for global trade.

The Houthis' military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, in a recorded address, said 73 strikes hit five regions of Yemen.

—PTI

Pro-Palestinian protesters near International Court of Justice during the hearing against Israel, in The Hague *PHOTO: REUTERS*

Israel defends itself at ICJ against genocide charge

THE HAGUE, 12 JAN

Accused of committing genocide against Palestinians, Israel planned to defend its war in Gaza in front of the United Nations' highest court Friday, a day after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blasted the allegations as hypocrisy that "screams to the heavens."

Israel, which was founded in the aftermath of the Holocaust, has vehemently denied the accusations brought by South Africa in one of the biggest cases ever to come before an international court.

South African lawyers asked the court on Thursday to order an immediate halt to Israeli military operations in the besieged coastal territory that is home to 2.3 million Palestinians.

Israel boycotts international tribunals and UN investigations, saying they are unfair and biased. But, in a sign of how seriously they regard the case, Israeli leaders have taken the rare step of sending a legal team and engaging with the International Court of Justice to defend their reputation. South African lawyers argued that the war is part of decades of Israeli oppression of Palestinians.

- South African lawyers asked the court on Thursday to order an immediate halt to Israeli military operations in the besieged coastal territory that is home to 2.3 million Palestinians.

"The scale of destruction in Gaza, the targeting of family homes and civilians, the war being a war on children all make clear that genocidal intent is both understood and has been put into practice. The articulated intent is the destruction of Palestinian life," lawyer Tembeka Ngcukaitobi said in opening statements Thursday. The case strikes at the heart of Israel's national identity and goes to the core of one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

More than 23,000 people in Gaza have died during the military campaign, according to the Health Ministry in the territory, which is run by Hamas.

"Nothing will stop the suffering except an order from this court," South African lawyer Adila Hassim told the judges in a packed room of the Peace Palace in The Hague. *—AP*

Taiwan prez poll is a test for China's control over Asia

TAIPEI, 12 JAN

Taiwan is preparing to elect a president and legislature on Saturday in what many see as a test of control with China, which claims the self-governing island republic as its own territory to be unified with force if necessary.

The presidential race is tight, and both China and Taiwan's key ally, the US, are weighing in on political and economic issues they hope will sway voters.

The election pits Vice President Lai Ching-te, representing the Democratic Progressive Party, against Hou Yu-ih of the main Opposition Nationalist Party, and former mayor of the capital Taipei, Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party.

The US strongly backs Taiwan against China's military threats and the Biden administration plans to send an unofficial delegation comprised of former senior officials to the island shortly after the polls.

Shaw-Kong *PHOTO: REUTERS*

That move could upset efforts to repair ties between Beijing and Washington that plunged in recent years over trade, Covid-19, Washington's support for Taiwan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which China has refused to condemn at the United Nations.

Along with the tensions with China, much in the Taiwan election hinges on domestic issues, particularly over an economy that was estimated to have only grown by 1.4 per cent last year.

—AP

SUNAK IN UKRAINE

UK to give $3 bn aid to Kyiv, largest since Russia war

KYIV, 12 JAN

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is visiting Kyiv on Friday to announce a new package of support for Ukraine, including an increase in military funding for its war with Russia.

Sunak is expected to announce that military funding for Ukraine for the next financial year will USD 3.2 billion, the statement said. The funding would cover long-range missiles, air defence, artillery ammunition and maritime security. "We will stand with Ukraine, in their darkest hours and in the better times to come."

Sunak first visited Ukraine in November 2022, soon after he became prime minister. Britain has been one of Ukraine's most vocal backers. Britain is the second-biggest donor of military aid to Ukraine after the US, giving a total of USD 3.3 billion in 2022 and 2023.

Sunak's visit came hours after the British and US militaries bombed Yemen, hitting more than a dozen sites used by the Iranian-backed Houthis. Those concerns have drawn attention away from Ukraine's struggle a shift that Zelenskyy is trying to counter through diplomacy. Both Ukraine and Russia are scrambling to replenish their weapons after 22 months of fighting and the potential for a protracted conflict. The roughly 1,500km front line has been largely static during winter, and both Ukraine and Russia require artillery shells, missiles and drones that enable long-range strikes.

Rishi Sunak talks to firefighters ahead of meeting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv, Ukraine *PHOTO: REUTERS*

Ukraine says Moscow is receiving artillery shells and missiles from North Korea and drones from Iran. On 4 January, the White House cited US intelligence officials as saying that Russia acquired ballistic missiles from North Korea and is seeking them from Iran. Ukraine's leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy is pushing Kyiv's Western allies to provide Ukraine with more support on top of military aid . *—AP*

Japan satellite to watch for N Korean missiles

TOKYO, 12 JAN

Japan launched a rocket carrying a government intelligence-gathering satellite Friday on a mission to watch movements at military sites in North Korea and improve responses to natural disasters.

The H2A rocket, launched by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd., lifted off from the Tanegashima Space Centre in southwestern Japan, carrying the optical satellite as part of Tokyo's reconnaissance effort to rapidly buildup its military capability.

The satellite can capture images even in severe weather. Japan began the intelligence-gathering satellite program after a North Korean missile flew over Japan in 1988 and it aims to set up a network of 10 satellites to spot and provide early warning for possible missile launches.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government, under its national security strategy adopted in 2022, is pushing to deploy long-range US-made Tomahawk and other cruise missiles as early as next year to build up more strike capability, breaking from the country's exclusively self-defence-only post-war principle, citing rapid weapons advancement in China and North Korea.

—AP

Myanmar rebel groups, military agree to ceasefire

BEIJING, 12 JAN

Myanmar's military has reached a ceasefire agreement with an alliance of ethnic minority guerrilla groups it has been battling in the north, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

The agreement was brokered at talks mediated by China on Wednesday and Thursday in Kunming, a Chinese provincial capital about 400km from the border with Myanmar, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said.

Myanmar has been wracked by violence that began after the Army ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021.

An alliance of three armed groups launched an offensive against the military in October and took control of Laukkaing, a key city on the border with China, last week.

China is concerned about the rising violence and the safety of citizens in northern Myanmar, where there is an active border trade between the two countries. China has also been cracking down on cyberscam operations that have trafficked Chinese workers into Myanmar and forced them to work, including in Laukkaing.

Mao said the military and the Three Brotherhood Alliance which comprises the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army agreed to an immediate cease-fire, the disengaging of military personnel and the settlement of their disputes through negotiations.

—AP

N KOREA POISED TO ADMIT 1ST TOURISTS SINCE PANDEMIC

SEOUL, 12 JAN

Russian tourists reportedly going on a ski trip to North Korea will be the first international travellers to visit the country since its borders closed in 2020 amid the global pandemic lockdown.

The report, published Wednesday by the Russian state-run Tass news agency, underscores deepening cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang. It also follows the meeting last September between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a cosmodrome in Russia's Far East.

Tass did not specify a timeframe but the report brough some surprise to Asia observers who had expected the first post-pandemic tourists to North Korea to come from China, the North's biggest diplomatic ally and economic pipeline.

According to Tass, an unspecified number of tourists from Russia's far eastern region of Primorye will first fly to the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, where they will visit monuments such as the "Tower of Juche Idea," named after the North's guiding philosophy of "juche" or self-reliance.

—AP

BUSINESSES HIT, SCHOOLS SHUT

Ecuador returns to normal after gang horror

QUITO, 12 JAN

Gradually, and with trepidation, life in Guayaquil is beginning to return.

Few residents have fully recovered from the shock - from the outright chaos and bloodshed - of this week, a moment which will live long in the city's collective memory.

But Dina Moreno can't afford to stay home any longer. She sells mobile phone accessories at Guayaquil's biggest covered market and, like many of her fellow stallholders, has ventured out to open her business and get back to work.

"I've never seen anything like it," she recalls with a shudder.

"When we saw what was happening at the TV station and we heard gunshots, everyone went crazy and started shutting up their shops and trying to get home."

A soldier patrols in a commercial area in the aftermath of violence, in Guayaquil, Ecuador *PHOTO: REUTERS*

Behind her, as she talks, Dina's seven-year-old son plays with some mobile phone covers. Schools in the city remain closed after the explosion of gang violence. Such was her loss of income from two days with no sales, Dina had no choice but to bring him to work.

It's a similar story elsewhere in the sprawling market, as street food vendors, delivery boys and a preacher reciting Bible verses bring back the noise and bustle which has been absent since the attack.

The spectre of the drug-gang violence remains, though. One vendor, Jorge, said that the stall owners were all watching out for each other under the market's huge white awnings, keeping an eye out for the first sign of more trouble or the return of armed men to the streets.

"I'm not scared of death," he says, without a hint of bravado. "I just want to see peace return to my Ecuador."

But while the small businesses of Guayaquil may be trying to get back to some form of normality, it's far from business as usual for Andres. His brother is among the 178 prison staff - most of them guards - still being held hostage by the gangs.

"The only information we've had is from the guards who managed to get out. They're the only ones who have told us that our relatives are OK," he tells me from outside the Ambato prison, where he's spent hours waiting for news.

The police will only tell the desperate family members that they're waiting for orders to enter the prison. Andres says they haven't seen any movement from them in days.

He adds that the guards had warned that something bad was going to happen in the prison, but the authorities didn't listen.

—BBC News

US denies Nikhil's plea for defence materials

NEW YORK, 12 JAN

A US judge has denied a request for defence materials by Indian national Nikhil Gupta, charged by federal prosecutors in a murder-for-hire plot to kill a Khalistani separatist on American soil.

United States District Judge Victor Marrero, in an order Thursday, denied a motion filed by Gupta's attorney seeking discovery material in the case.

Gupta, 52, was charged by federal prosecutors here in an indictment unsealed in November last year with working with an Indian government employee in the foiled plot to kill Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, who holds dual US and Canadian citizenships, on American soil.

Gupta was arrested in Prague, the Czech Republic on 30 June, 2023 and is being held there currently. The US government is seeking his extradition to America.

In his order, Marrero said that the Court is persuaded by the government's argument that Gupta has no right to discovery at this time.Marrero said in his order that Gupta has failed to identify any authority suggesting that a defendant has a right to discovery before arraignment.

"Gupta has not yet been arraigned in this case, and the government is currently seeking Gupta's extradition from the Czech Republic to the United States," Marrero said. He added that the government has assured the Court that it is "prepared to produce discovery promptly upon the defendant's appearance in this District." Gupta's counsel in New York had filed a Motion to Compel Production of Discovery' on 4 January in the US District Court, Southern District of New York requesting the Court to direct federal prosecutors to provide "the defence materials." *—PTI*

Rupee rises 11 paise to settle at 82.90 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 12 JAN

The rupee strengthened for the eighth consecutive session and settled with a gain of 11 paise at 82.90 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, buoyed by robust equity market sentiments.Forex traders said an upward move in crude oil prices and stronger American currency, however, contained the uptick of the Indian currency, even as investors remained concerned about the domestic macroeconomic data to be released later in the day.At the interbank foreign exchange, the domestic currency opened weak at 83.08 and traded between 82.86 and 83.10 against the greenback during intra-day deals.The unit finally settled at 82.90 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 11 paise over its previous close, amid a bullish trend in domestic equities, wherein benchmark indices climbed lifetime highs.The domestic currency settled 2 paise higher at 83.01 on Thursday.—*PTI*

Gold rises ₹130; silver slumps ₹300

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Gold prices roseRs 130 to Rs 63,280 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday amid a jump in precious metal prices globally, according to HDFC Securities. The yellow metal had closed at Rs 63,150 per 10 grams in the previous trade.Silver, however, slumped Rs 300 to Rs 76,000 per kilogram."Spot gold prices in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 63,280/10 gram, up Rs 130 taking cues from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.Meanwhile, in the futures trade, February contract of gold climbed Rs 541 to Rs 62,329 per 10 grams on the MCX. Also, March contract of silver jumped Rs 695 to Rs 72,049 per kg on the exchange.—*PTI*

WB's garment industry meet generates ₹850 cr biz

KOLKATA, 12 JAN

The 55th Garment Buyers and Sellers Meet of WBGMDA generated an estimated Rs 850 crore in business transactions in wholesale deals, an official said on Friday.Over 900 national and international brands participated in the three-day event of the West Bengal Garment and Manufacturer and Dealers Association (WBGMDA), a statement said."This industry already boasts one of the largest workforces in the country, with over 50 lakh employees engaged directly or indirectly," said HariKishanRathi, president of WBGMDA."TheRs 850 crore in business transactions, driven by participation from 900 national and international brands, reinforces the potential of this meet to elevate Bengal's readymade garment industry. We are deeply grateful for the government's continued support for the textile and garment sector, particularly in promoting clothing businesses and marketing opportunities," he said.The association has requested the state government for land for a dedicated showroom hub for garment makers at Rajarhat, New Town which will help draw more buyers to the state. —*PTI*

Tata Motors starts production at Sanand plant

NEW DELHI,12 JAN

Tata Motors on Friday said it has commenced production at its new production facility at Sanand in Gujarat.Tata Passenger Electric Mobility Ltd, a unit of Tata Motors, had acquired the facility from Ford India for Rs 725.7 crore in January last year."We have successfully retooled the factory in the shortest span of 12 months, taking it to a new level to accommodate a wide range of existing products and future new models to come," Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles and Tata Passenger Electric Mobility (TPEM) MD Shailesh Chandra said in a statement.—*PTI*

IT stocks rally lifts markets to new lifetime high

The 30-share BSE Sensex zoomed 847.27 points or 1.18 per cent

MUMBAI, 12 JAN

A total of 2,112 stocks advanced, while 1,742 declined and 88 remained unchanged on the BSE
PHOTO: X

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty surged over 1 per cent to hit their fresh all-time highs on Friday, driven by a stellar rally in IT stocks after TCS and Infosys reported better-than-expected financial results.

Besides, a strengthening rupee and hectic buying on tech, realty and oil counters amid a mixed trend in global markets further bolstered sentiment, traders said.

The 30-share BSE Sensex zoomed 847.27 points or 1.18 per cent to settle at a new closing high of 72,568.45. During the day, it jumped 999.78 points or 1.39 per cent to reach a new intra-day record of 72,720.96.

A total of 2,112 stocks advanced, while 1,742 declined and 88 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The Nifty climbed 247.35 points or 1.14 per cent to settle at a lifetime closing high of 21,894.55. During the day, it rallied 281.05 points or 1.29 per cent to reach its fresh intra-day record peak of 21,928.25.

On a weekly basis, the BSE benchmark jumped 542.3 points or 0.75 per cent, and the Nifty climbed 183.75 points or 0.84 per cent.

"Indian markets soared to new heights in a powerful rally, driven by IT heavyweights. Green shoots of recovery in the IT sector on the back of an improved outlook for BFSI in FY25 positively influenced market sentiments. The robust performance of PSU banking stocks is underscored by the inherent synergy between their loan portfolios and the prevailing business cycle.

"Noteworthy is the fact that this upward surge remained resilient amid mixed global cues on account of higher-than-expected US inflation and positive job data, which tempered expectations for an imminent rate cut by the US Fed," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Infosys jumped nearly 8 per cent after the company's December quarter earnings came in line with market expectations.

—*PTI*

Infosys shares jump 8 pc after December quarter earnings

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

The market capitalisation (mcap) of the IT services firm jumped Rs 48,652.73crore to Rs 6,69,135.15crore
PHOTO: REUTERS

Shares of Infosys jumped 8 per cent on Friday, adding Rs 48,652.73 crore to its market valuation, after the company's December quarter earnings came in-line with market expectations.

The stock rallied 7.84 per cent to settle at Rs 1,612.20 per piece on the BSE after a firm beginning. During the day, it zoomed 8 per cent to Rs 1,615.80.

On the NSE, it climbed 8 per cent to Rs 1,615 a share.

The market capitalisation (mcap) of the IT services firm jumped Rs 48,652.73crore to Rs 6,69,135.15crore.

In the equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 847.27 points or 1.18 per cent to settle at a new closing high of 72,568.45, and the Nifty climbed 247.35 points or 1.14 per cent to hit its lifetime closing high of 21,894.55.

Infosys was the biggest winner among the Sensex and Nifty firms.

In volume terms, 31.63 lakh shares of the company were traded on the BSE and over 2.67 crore shares on the NSE during the day.

The company's earnings came in post market hours on Thursday.

The country's second-largest IT services firm Infosys on Thursday reported a 7.3 per cent fall in net profit in the December quarter on sluggish demand from clients and cut its annual sales forecast.The company posted a net profit (attributable to shareholders) of Rs 6,106 crore compared to Rs 6,586 crore in the year-ago period, Infosys said in a regulatory filing."Infosys reported broadly in-line performance for the quarter. The revenue growth was above estimates; while EBIT margin was in-line with expectation," according to a report by YES Securities.Rally in Infosys also fuelled optimism in other IT stocks. The BSE Information Technology jumped 5.06 per cent to 37,120.45.SantoshMeena, Head of Research at Swastika Investmart Ltd, said Infosys results are mostly in-line, without any major surprises.

—*PTI*

FPI records highest inflow of $10.1bn

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

PHOTO: X

Inflows of US$ 10.1bn in December 2320 are the highest ever monthly inflows recorded in a single month, a research by Bank of Baroda (NS:BOB) said.

The report said that the FPI flows into India witnessed a turnaround in 2023, registering inflows of US$ 28.7bn compared with outflows of US$ 17.9bn in 2022.

"Inflows in 2023 were the highest since 2017, when FPIs poured in US$ 30.8bn in the domestic market. However, true to their nature, FPI flows exhibited a great deal of volatility throughout the year," the report said.

The report said that after a dismal start, FPI flow into India picked up pace, cumulatively totaling US$ 28.7bn in 2023.

"While equity segment continued to outperform, encouraging trend was also visible in the debt segment, particularly in the last few months of the year," the report said.

It said that the improved corporate profitability, stable domestic macros, range-bound inflation and a stable political environment favour India as a preferred investment destination.

The report said that the India's inclusion in JP Morgan's bond index in June 24 as well as hopes that India might subsequently be included in other bond indices has been a key driver of FPI inflows in the debt segment."The trend is likely to persist and gather more pace in the first 2-quarters of 2024," the report said.

It said that this will be positive for INR, which is likely to trade with an appreciating bias in 2024.

—*IANS*

MakeMyTrip sees jump in Ayodhya trips

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Online travel company MakeMyTrip on Friday said it has seen a 1,806 per cent increase in searches for Ayodhya on the platform since the announcement of the inauguration. The company shared data on Instagram, saying that it recorded a 97 per cent growth in searches for spiritual destinations in the last two years.It also mentioned that the peak search for Ayodhya was recorded on 30 December last year when the airport inauguration took place.The top 10 pilgrimage and spiritual destinations which have seen growth in searches include Ayodhya (585 per cent), Ujjain (359 per cent), Badrinath (343 per cent), Amarnath (329 per cent), Kedarnath (322 per cent), Mathura (223 per cent), Dwarkadhish (193 per cent), Shirdi (181 per cent), Haridwar (117 per cent), and Bodh Gaya (114 per cent). Ayodhya is also being searched globally, with the maximum search coming from -- US (22.5 per cent), Gulf (22.2 per cent), Canada (9.3 per cent), the company said.

—*PTI*

TCS shares climb over 4 pc post Q3 earnings; mcap surges ₹51,922 cr

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Shares of Tata Consultancy Services climbed more than 4 per cent in morning trade on Friday, adding Rs 51,921.94 crore to its market valuation, after the company reported an 8.2 per cent growth in net income for the December quarter at Rs 11,735 crore.

The stock jumped 4.21 per cent to Rs 3,893.70 on the BSE.

On the NSE, it rallied 4.24 per cent to Rs 3,894 apiece. The company's market capitalisation (mcap) went up by Rs 51,921.94 crore to Rs 14,19,016.71crore during the morning trade.

In the equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex traded with a jump of 701.29 points at 72,422.47, and the Nifty climbed 191.95 points to 21,836.25, powered by a rally in IT stocks.

From the Sensex and Nifty pack, Infosys, Wipro, Tech Mahindra, and HCL Technologies were also trading significantly higher.The largest software exporter Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) on Thursday reported an 8.2 per cent growth in net income for the December quarter at Rs 11,735 crore, driven by a massive growth in the home market that offset to a large extent the impact of a 3 per cent degrowth in the US market.The top management of the Tata Group company said its revenue for the reporting quarter grew 4 per cent to Rs 60,583 crore driven by strong double-digit growth in emerging markets, led by the home market on the back of a massive project from state-owned telco BSNL. The company also declared a payout of Rs 27 a share, including a Rs 18 per share special dividend. —*PTI*

'Govt will not interfere with direct selling'

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

Consumer Affairs Secretary Rohi Kumar Singh on Friday told the direct selling industry that the authorities will not interfere with its business model as long as it is "right" and cautioned that the government cannot be taken for a rideHis remarks come against the backdrop of concerns and certain instances of direct selling businesses getting linked with money circulation and ponzi scheme activities."As long as you are right, we are with you. But if money circulation is involved, subscription is not explained, then the government will interfere. You cannot take the government for a ride," Singh said while addressing a conference organised by the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT).The government has taken action against certain entities in the direct selling industry for alleged misdoings."The problem with your industry (direct selling) is perception... I am sure you are doing right but you need to work on your perception," he urged the industry to bring more clarity in their business model. —*PTI*

SKY HIGH PRICES

Oil prices surge as US, UK strike Houthis, stocks mixed after US inflation

HONG KONG, 12 JAN

Houthis have carried out a growing number of strikes on the international Red Sea route since the Gaza war
PHOTO: AP

Oil prices surged Friday after US and UK forces launched strikes against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen following attacks on ships in the Red Sea, fuelling worries about a wider conflict in the crude-rich region.

The move weighed on sentiment among investors, though stocks were mixed after data showing US inflation rose more than expected last month further dented hopes for an early interest rate cut by the Federal Reserve.

The offensive against rebel positions in Yemen -- which included fighter jets and Tomahawk missiles -- fanned already high tensions in the Middle East as Israel presses on with a war in Gaza in response to a Hamas attack on the country in October.

The Houthis have carried out a growing number of strikes on the key international Red Sea route since the Gaza war erupted, hitting trade flows at a time when supply strains are putting upward pressure on inflation globally.

Washington and London's decision followed a Huthi bombardment this week that was said to be their heaviest to date, having carried out missions on an almost daily basis since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

News of the US-UK strikes, which President Joe Biden said also had support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands, sent oil prices up more than two percent Friday, with analysts saying WTI could pass $75 and Brent could top $80.

The jump in prices sparked concerns about a fresh spike in inflation that could complicate central bank pivots to a more dovish monetary policy this year, reviving worries about the economy.

"If oil were to substantially increase... that would jeopardise... this soft landing scenario that is quite likely for the year," Andrew Slimmon, of Morgan Stanley Investment Management, told Bloomberg Television.

Investor sentiment was further dampened by data showing the US consumer price index rose more than forecast in December, dealing another blow to the prospects of the Fed starting its rate cut cycle as soon as March.

Equities had finished 2023 with a strong rally on expectations the central bank would hit the ground running on cutting rates owing to falling inflation and an indication from decision-makers that they would do so this year.

— *PTI*

EDTECH SUFFERS

BlackRock, which owns less than 1 per cent of Byju's, has valued its shares at about USD 209.6 apiece
PHOTO: X

BlackRock cuts Byju's valuation to mere USD 1B

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN

US-based investment firm BlackRock has once again cut the value of its holding in Byju's, reducing the edtech major's valuation to a mere USD 1 billion from USD 22 billion in early 2022.

BlackRock, which owns less than 1 per cent of Byju's, has valued its shares at about USD 209.6 apiece, down from the peak of USD 4,660 in 2022, reports TechCrunch.Byju's did not immediately comment on the latest valuation cut. This isn't the first time BlackRock has cut the worth of its holding in Byju's. Investment firm Prosus, which owns nearly 9 per cent in Byju's, has also marked down the value of its stake in Byju's to less than $3 billion, representing a decline of more than 86 per cent from the previous funding round valuation of $22 billion.In November last year, Prosus first slashed the fair value of Byju's to $5.97 billion."Byju's is facing multiple headwinds. We and other shareholders are working every day to improve the situation. We are in close discussions with the company every day," a senior Prosus executive was quoted as saying in reports late last year. Byju's was preparing to go public in early 2022 through a SPAC deal that would have valued the company at up to USD 40 billion.reports say, Byju's needs at least Rs 500-Rs 600 crore to pay off dues. —*IANS*

Zydus Group to invest ₹5K cr in Guj

GANDHINAGAR, 12 JAN

PHOTO: PTI

Zydus Group on Friday announced plans to invest Rs 5,000 crore in Gujarat in various sectors, including new generation biotechnology products and hospitals, its Chairman Pankaj Patel said.Speaking at the 10th Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit here, Patel said his group has signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with the state for the investments."We have signed MoUs of over Rs 5,000 crore. We'll be investing into next generation biotechnology products, new medical device initiatives and hospitals for the healthcare sector," he said. Patel said he has been attending the biennial summit since its inception and thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah for helping businesses when it needs it the most.He said business needs leadership with a vision and the one that pushes to think bigger, which is offered in Gujarat. —*PTI*

Amid Red Sea attacks, Tesla puts German factory production on hold

TEXAS, 12 JAN

Tesla says it's temporarily halting most production at its German factory because of attacks in the Red Sea, a vital global shipping corridor.The electric vehicle maker said in a statement Thursday night that its factory near Berlin, which makes Model Y vehicles and batteries, will pause from 29 January to 11 February.It's a fresh sign of how the hostilities in the Mideast are disrupting global manufacturing supply chains, with shipping companies reporting that they're being forced to reroute vessels carrying goods and components on the longer route around the southern tip of Africa. Analysts say the detour adds 10 days or more to the journey.The armed conflicts in the Red Sea and the associated shifts in transport routes between Europe and Asia via the Cape of Good Hope are also affecting production in Grnheide," Tesla said. The significantly longer transport times create a gap in the supply chains.The U.S. led airstrikes on Thursday against Yemen's Houthi rebels in response to their attacks on Red Sea shipping, Tesla said normal operations are expected to resume on 12 Februay. The factory in Grnheide, southeast of Berlin, is Tesla's first in Europe. It opened in 2022 and employs 11,000 workers. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Ranji Trophy: Hanuma Vihari quits as Andhra skipper

MUMBAI, 12 JAN

India player Hanuma Vihari will not be leading Andhra in the ongoing Ranji Trophy after having stepped down from captaincy on Thursday.On Friday, during Andhra's Group B match against Mumbai, Ricky Bhui was leading the side.According to media reports, Vihari's decision was personal and he wanted to focus on his batting.Vihari managed 51 runs in the opening game against Bengal, which ended in a draw. Interestingly, he was mulling a move to Madhya Pradesh before the start of the season, as he was eager to play under domestic coach Chandrakant Pandit to revive his international career.—*PTI*

PHOTO: AFP

Sheoran shoots gold, Tomar silver in 1-2 for India

JAKARTA, 12 JAN

Indian shooters Akhil Sheoran and Aishwarya Pratap Singh Tomar claimed gold and silver respectively in the men's 50m rifle 3 positions event of the Asian Olympic Qualifiers here on Friday, continuing the country's dominant show in the continental event.

Sheoran shot 460.2 to emerge victorious in the eight-men final, while Tokyo Olympian Tomar finished second on the podium with a score of 459.0. Thailand's Thongphaphum Vongsukdee settled for the bronze medal after managing 448.8.The duo of Sheoran and Tomar combined with Swapnil Kusale to also win the team gold medal in the same event ahead of Chinese and South Korean teams.—*PTI*

Formula E could return to India as soon as 2025: Longo

MEXICO CITY, 12 JAN

Formula E could return to India in 2025 and discussions with other cities to host a race will begin soon, said co-founder Alberto Longo, making it clear that the electric series is keen to race in the country despite the Hyderabad E-Prix cancellation.The Hyderabad race, which was scheduled to take place on February 10, was cancelled last week after just one season with Formula E alleging a breach of the host city agreement by the newly-elected Telangana government."We are working to coming to India in the future, we will be starting conversations with different cities in India soon," Longo told PTI ahead of the season-opening Mexico E-Prix.—*AP*

Sharath and Sathiyan star attractions in WTT

MAPUSA, 12 JAN

Achanta Sharath Kamal and Sathiyan Gnanasekaran, alongside 35 other paddlers from the country, are set to compete in the singles qualifiers as the upcoming WTT Star Contender gears up to achieve the highest-ever Indian participation.The second edition of the tournament will be played at the Peddem Indoor Stadium here from 23 to 28 January.Nine Indians, including the highest world-ranked Indian paddler Manika Batra and Harmeet Desai, secured direct entry into the main draw.The inclusion of 32 new names in the qualifying list brings India's total participation to 41 across categories. This surpasses the previous highest of 40 participants in the inaugural edition of the tournament. —*PTI*

Australian Open: Sumit Nagal outclasses Molcan

Nagal cruised past Molcan 6-4, 6-4 in two hours

MELBOURNE, 12 JAN

India's Sumit Nagal on Friday entered the singles main draw of the Australian Open with an easy win over Slovakia's Alex Molcan in the tournament's qualifying final here.

Nagal cruised past Molcan 6-4, 6-4 in two hours and three minutes, and won the match after his opponent double-faulted at 30-40 in the 10th game of the second set.

"It feels great, it's always nice to qualify for the Slam. My emotions were high after the match. I needed to calm myself down, I set in the locker room for an hour and a half," Nagal said after the match.

"It meant so much to me, looking at my last few years, going through surgery and not being able to play the tournaments which I wanted to play and ranked 500 something at the beginning of last year.

"So yeah, I worked very hard to be here and I am proud of myself and the team for making me the player I am today." Nagal will now face Kazakhstan's World No. 31 Alexander Bublik in the first round of the main tournament.

India's Sumit Nagal on Friday entered the singles main draw of the Australian Open with an easy win over Slovakia's Alex Molcan **PHOTO: X**

"I haven't thought about the next match. I need to enjoy this moment, it has been a while since I played the main draw in a Slam, so I am going to enjoy the night, call my parents chill with my coach, and then think about the next match.

"I am not even sure if I will be playing Monday or Tuesday yet but once Sunday comes, will look into it. But super excited and looking forward to be on the court for the main draw matches." Currently

- Nagal cruised past Molcan 6-4, 6-4 in two hours and three minutes, and won the match after his opponent double-faulted at 30-40 in the 10th game of the second set.

World No. 139 in singles, this is Nagal's second main draw appearance in the season's first Grand Slam after his entry in 2021. Nagal went down to Lithuania's Ricardas Berankis in the opening round 2-6, 5-7, 3-6 that year.

After that, no Indian has made it to the singles main draw before his feat this year.

Nagal had also made it to the US Open main draw in 2019 and 2020.

In the 2019 US Open, Nagal had stretched legendary Roger Federer to four sets at the Flushing Meadows before losing 6-4, 1-6, 2-6, 4-6.

A year later, the Indian managed to enter the second round of the season's final Grand Slam beating the host nation's Bradley Klahn in the first round 6-1, 6-3, 3-6, 6-1.

But Nagal went down to second seed and eventual champion Dominic Thiem 6-3, 6-3, 6-2 in the second round. —*PTI*

Jiri Lehecka of Czechoslovakia in action **PHOTO: AP**

Lehecka crushes Korda at Adelaide International

PARIS, 12 JAN

Jiri Lehecka defeated third-seeded Sebastian Korda 6-2, 6-1 on Friday to advance to the Adelaide International final.

The Czech player, who has dropped only one set in the tournament, will face Jack Draper in Saturday's final at Memorial Drive. Draper beat Alexander Bublik 7-6 (2), 6-4 in a night semifinal.

He lost last year to Novak Djokovic after having a championship point.

In the women's tournament, former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko beat Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-2, 7-6 (3). The sixth-seeded Ostapenko will play Daria Kasatkina in Saturday's final.

With previous wins over Sorana Cirstea, Caroline Garcia, and Marta Kostyuk, Ostapenko is into her first hard-court final since winning Seoul in 2022. On Friday, Ostapenko earned her third win in seven tour-level matches against Alexandrova.

"She can serve big and she's hitting the ball great," Ostapenko said of Alexandrova. "I was trying to play my game, even if sometimes I could find it, try to be consistent, and when I had the chance to go for it." Kasatkina advanced to the final after second-seeded Jessica Pegula withdrew with a gastrointestinal illness. It was the second consecutive walkover for Kasatkina after Laura Siegemund withdrew ahead of their quarterfinal due to a left leg injury. —*AP*

Indian tennis star Rohan Bopanna and his Australian partner Matthew Ebden advanced to the final of the Adelaide International tournament in their first outing of the season here on Friday.

Satwik-Chirag enter men's doubles semifinals

KUALA LUMPUR, 12 JAN

MALAYSIA OPEN

Star Indian shuttlers Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty reached their second successive semifinal after humbling China's Ren Xiang Yu and He Ji Ting in straight games at the Malaysia Open Super 1000 tournament here on Friday.

The world number 2 Indian pair, who won the Asian Games gold medal last year, looked in control during the rallies and were also proactive at the net to eke out a dominating 21-11 21-8 win over world no. 32 Yu and Ting in just 35 minutes.

The second-seeded Indians will face either Korea's Kang Min Hyuk and Seo Seung Jae or the third-seeded Malaysian pair of Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik.

Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto, however, suffered a 15-21 13-21 loss to Japan's Rin Iwanaga and Kie Nakanishi in the women's doubles quarterfinals.

The world no. 24 Indians, who created a flutter after stunning former world no. 1 and twice world champions Mayu Matsumoto and Wakana Nagahara on Thursday, couldn't sustain the same performance against the combination of Iwanaga and Nakanishi, going down 15-21 13-21 in a 39-minute match.

This was the Indian pair's second loss to the world no. 15 Japanese duo, having suffered a narrow

Star Indian shuttlers Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty reached their second successive semifinal **PHOTO:X**

Avani Prashanth cards 3-under 70

MELBOURNE, 12 JAN

Avani Prashanth carded a fine 3-under 70 in the fourth and final round but still ended up second to Rianne Mikhaela Malixi of the Philippines by one shot in the Australian Master of Amateurs Championships here Friday.

The Indian was in fine fettle and her 70 on the day saw her finishing the 72-hole event with a total of 6-under, even as the 16-year-old Malixi, who was tied with the Indian in the second place after three rounds, shot 4-under 69 to grab the title.

Avani had rounds of 71-68-77-70 for a 6-under 286 while Malixi with 70-72-74-69 carded 7-under 285.

Japan's Nika Ito, who led after the first two rounds, finished third with 68-70-78-71 at 5-under 287, while the 54-hole leader, Australia's Lion Higo was fourth with cards of 71-71-70-76.

Malixi and Avani will battle it out again next week at the Australian Amateurs and then at the Women's Amateur Asia-Pacific in Thailand in early February.

The win also marked a fine birthday present for Malixi's mother, Michelle, who celebrated her birthday on Wednesday.

But Avani was not disheartened. "Well, I think it was a good week. I can't complain too much. But I didn't have the best day in the third round. But there's always the next week.".

Nevertheless, it was another fine result for Avani, who since finishing sixth at the same event last year, has been in great form. —*PTI*

Avani Prashanth **PHOTO: PTI**

Iga Swiatek focused after 'peaceful' off-season ahead of Australian Open

MELBOURNE, 12 JAN

Iga Swiatek **PHOTO: AFP**

World number one Iga Swiatek said Friday a "peaceful" off-season had left her more focused heading into the Australian Open as she targets her first Grand Slam title at Melbourne Park. The Polish top seed is in imperious form, dropping just one set in five wins at the lead-up United Cup mixed-teams tournament in Perth. She enters the opening Grand Slam of the year as a favorite, on a 16-match win streak that included tournament victories at the China Open and the WTA Finals. "It was nice to play some high-quality matches against the top players (at the United Cup)," she said. "I realized that I'm feeling pretty confident, a little bit better than last year. Hopefully, this feeling is going to stay with me."

Swiatek's win over Jessica Pegula to lift the WTA Finals title in Cancun returned her to the top-ranking spot she has held for much of the past two seasons.

Still only 22, she said she had learned to better handle the pressures that come with being world number one and approached her off-season differently.

"I would say it was more peaceful. I literally could just focus on practicing and resting," she said. "I was committed. I didn't feel so, I don't know, tired.

"I didn't feel like I was burdened with this off-court stuff. I could just focus. Like every day was 100 percent quality. That's why I feel like was a little bit better." Swiatek has four Grand Slam titles to her name three French Opens and a US Open. But her best performance in Melbourne was reaching the semi-finals in 2022. —*AP*

Tim Southee hits milestone as NZ beat Pak in first T20I

AUCKLAND, 12 JAN

Tim Southee became the first player to 150 wickets in Twenty20 internationals as New Zealand beat Pakistan by 46 runs Friday in their series opener in Auckland. Veteran seam bowler Southee claimed four wickets to pass the milestone and help dismiss the tourists for 180 in the 18th over in response to New Zealand's imposing 226-8, handing them first blood in the five-match series. Southee's figures of 4-25 were the best of a run-dominated encounter at Eden Park and took him to 151 wickets in T20 internationals, 11 more than Bangladesh spinner Shakib Al Hasan.

He finished the job as Pakistan's run chase capitulated after Babar Azam was the seventh wicket to fall in the 17th over, with the former captain having accelerated to 57 off 35 balls to keep his side in contention. New Zealand 226 for 7 (Mitchell 61, Williamson 57, Abbas 3-46) beat Pakistan 180 (Babar 57, Southee 4-25) by 46 runs. —*AP*

Taking SA20 to India a great move: Boucher

CHENNAI, 12 JAN

Taking the SA20 to India in the future could be "great" despite the logistical challenges such a move may involve, feels former South Africa cricketer Mark Boucher.Like the 2009 edition of the IPL was held in South Africa due to general elections in India, Boucher admitted the SA20 could be organized in the cricket-crazy Asian nation shortly."I think it's a great idea; I'm not against it. The IPL happened in South Africa, and we can do the same, as both cricketing nations share a great relationship," Boucher said during a virtual media interaction on Friday."Although the challenges of playing in India will be different, it will still be great. —*AP*

Mandya Open: Karan ousts Kris

MANDYA, 12 JAN

Karan Singh scripted the biggest upset of the tournament when he showed the top seed Kris Van Wyk of South Africa the door to enter the semifinals of the PET ITF Mandya Open.

In the first quarterfinal played at the PET Stadium here on Friday, the 20-year-old won in straight sets 6-3, 6-3 to set up a last-four clash with Jelle Sels of The Netherlands.

Sels quelled the challenge of his countrymate Thijmen Loof 6-7 (4), 6-1, 6-4 in the longest match of the day which lasted a little over two hours.

Karan Singh **PHOTO: AP**

Following Karan's footsteps was Siddharth Vishwakarma who also registered an upset victory over fifth seed Nam Hoang Ly of Vietnam in straight sets 6-1, 6-4.

The lanky Indian will meet third seed Orel Kimhi in the other semifinal. The Australian stopped the dream run of Madhwin Kamath with a 7-6 (5), 6-0 win. Meanwhile, Karan and his Korean partner Woobin Shin upset the third-seeded pair of Tsung-Hao Huang of Taipei and Kris Van Wyk with a scoreline of 1-6, 6-3, 10-7 to enter the finals of the doubles event. Karan and Woobi will meet the fourth-seeded Indian pair of Parikshit Somani and Manish Sureshkumar who breezed past the top-seeded duo of Grigoriy Lomakin of Khazakstan and Austrian David Pichler 6-3, 6-2. —*AP*

EYEING PARIS OLYMPICS BERTH

Indian women's team opens campaign against US

RANCHI, 12 JAN

Putting behind the disappointment of finishing third at the Asian Games, the Indian women's team will look to cash in on home advantage and secure a ticket to Paris as it faces the USA in its FIH Olympic Qualifiers opener here on Saturday.

Hosts India, Germany, Czech Republic, Italy, Japan, the US, Chile and New Zealand are the eight teams vying for the top three slots here to book their Paris berths.

The Paris Olympics will be held from 26 July to 11 August this year.

World number five Germany is the highest-ranked team in the tournament, while India is a rung below in sixth.

New Zealand are ninth in the rankings chart, followed by Japan (11th), Chile (14th), US (15th), Italy (19th) and the Czech Republic (25th).

India is placed in Pool B alongside New Zealand, Italy, and the United States, while Germany, and former Asian Games champions Japan, Chile and the Czech Republic are in Pool A.

After the US game, India will meet New Zealand (14 January) and Italy (16 January). The semi-finals will be played on 18 January and the final is scheduled on 19 January.

In modern-day hockey, rankings don't hold much significance.

Since 1983, India and the US have played against each other 15 times, out of which the Americans came out victories on nine occasions and the Indians on just two matches ending in draws.

Going by statistics, it won't be a cakewalk for the Indians and they will have to bring out their 'A' game to outwit the Americans.

"We did not qualify for the Olympics from the Asian Games and we know it was a missed opportunity. But we don't dwell on the past," India's chief coach Janneke Schopman had said at the pre-tournament press conference. "We are hoping to do well in this tournament. We need to be better (than before) and if we play to our best, we can qualify for the Olympics (from here)." The build-up to the tournament has been far from rosy for the Indians with veteran striker Vandana Katariya being ruled out of the event just nine days before kick-off after fracturing her cheekbone during a training session.

Vandana, who recently became the first woman to earn 300 caps for the Indian team, was a vital cog in the forward line. She has been replaced by young Baljeet Kaur.

The team will surely miss Vandana's services as she has been a key member for a decade and has competed in all major competitions, including the Rio and Tokyo Olympics. She is also the first Indian women's hockey player to score a hat-trick at the Summer Games. Going forward, the Indians would look to improve upon their penalty conversion rate which has been a problem area for a long. Just before this tournament, the drag flickers had a short stint with former India stalwart Rupinderpal Singh, which should hold them in good stead in the coming matches. The Indian women had wasted plenty of penalty corners in the tournaments since winning the Asian Champions Trophy here, including in the Asian Games. "Rupinder has the expertise as he is an experienced player. He knows the pressure on the top of 'D'. It was a great help for the likes of Gurjit Kaur and Deepika to fine-tune their skills. —*PTI*

Indian women's hockey team captain Savita Punia with teammate Bichu Devi Kharibam and head coach Janneke Schopman during a training session ahead of the FIH Hockey Olympic Qualifiers 2024 match against the USA. **PHOTO: PTI**

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